Isaac Asimov: 1920 - 1992

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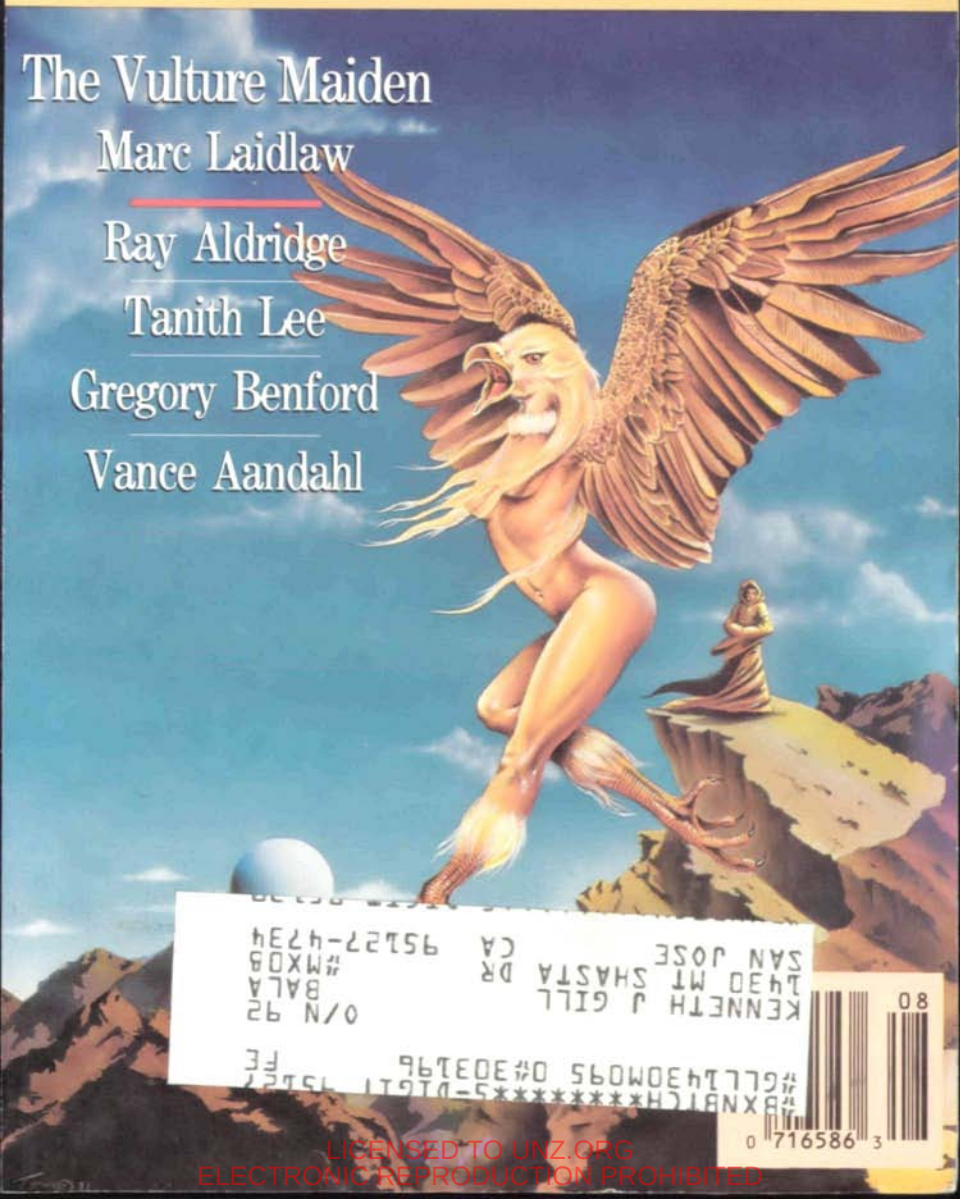

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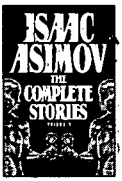

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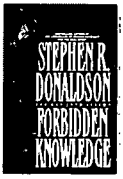

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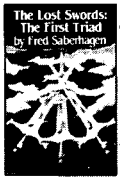

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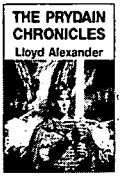

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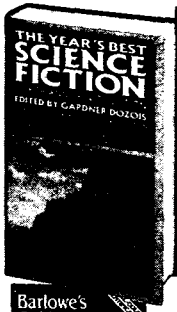

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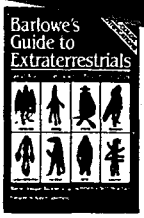

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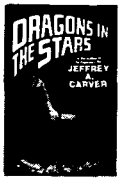

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THE MAGAZINE OF
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AUGUST • 43rd Year of Publication

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GENERAL OFFICE: 14 JEWELL ST. CORNWALL, CT 06753
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On the morning of April 6, Harlan Ellison woke me with a phone call: Isaac Asimov had died during the night. The news was not a surprise. Dr. Asimov had been in and out of the hospital most of the year. Still, it's hard to imagine that he's gone.

He had touched so many lives with his writing that his death made headlines worldwide. The contributions he made, from writing excellent stories to developing laws of robotics to making science accessible to the layman, will stay with us forever.

A tribute to Dr. Asimov follows. Included are short essays by Harlan Ellison and publisher Ed Ferman. We also have the last piece that Dr. Asimov wrote for the magazine: a short Farewell that he sent with his 399th column last summer.

The field will never see another person like Isaac Asimov, and we will all miss him.

— Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Isaac Asimov

2 January 1920 - 6 April 1992

by HARLAN ELLISON

EVERYTHING he stood for, everything he tried to teach us, prevents me from eulogizing him by way of suggesting He Has Gone to a Better Place. I'd really like to; but he won't permit it.

In the 1984 collection of his science essays from this very magazine, 'X' STANDS FOR UNKNOWN, Isaac wrote: "There seems to be a vague notion that something omniscient and omnipotent *must* exist. If it can be shown that scientists are not all-knowing and all-powerful, then that must be the proof that something else that *is* omniscient and omnipotent *does* exist. In other words: Since scientists can't synthesize sucrose, God exists.

"Well, God may exist; I won't argue the point here —"

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And a year earlier, in THE ROVING MIND, he began an essay on "faith" titled "Don't You Believe?" like this:

"One of the curses of being a well-known science-fiction writer is that unsophisticated people assume you to be soft in the head. They come to you for refuge from a hard and skeptical world.

"Don't you believe in flying saucers, they ask me? Don't you believe in telepathy? — in ancient astronauts? — in the Bermuda triangle? — in life after death?

"No, I reply. No, no, no, no, and again no."

How dare I, then, dishonor all that he was about, publicly and privately, in print and in person, for fifty-four years, by suggesting that at last Isaac will be able to get first-hand answers to the questions that drove him crazy throughout most of his life, from Darwin and Roentgen and Einstein and Galileo and Faraday and Tesla . . . just sitting around shooting the breeze with the guys, as Archimedes mixes the drinks.

As it was for all of us who needed a question answered, who called Isaac at all hours of the day or night, who drowned him in requests for answers to conundra, so it will now be for Isaac, chasing down Cervantes and Willy Shakespeare and Jesus, buttonholing them for the answers to the maybe six or seven things in the universe he didn't know. Such little fantasies might make it easier to live with his death, but it would only be balm for those of us who listened to Isaac for decades but reverted to superstition when the bullets whistled past our ears.

Gone is gone, and with the passing of Isaac, who loved us deeply enough to chivvy us toward smartness with a relentless passion, the universe had shrunk more than a little. He is gone and, as I write these words less than twelve hours later, there is no more crying left in me. Those of us here at the magazine so dear to his heart, the magazine that contained his cleverness and sensibleness and wisdom for 399 installments (not to mention all the stories), well, we've known he wouldn't be with us much longer for many months; and we've had time to wring ourselves out. And yet there is no end to the sense of helplessness and loss.

Isaac was as much a part of this journal through the years as paper and ink; and though gone, he remains with us. As he remains with the uncounted thousands of young people who read his essays and stories and went into careers of scientific inquiry, who understood the physical

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universe because he made it graspable, who became better able to handle their lives because he refused to allow them to accept dogma and bigotry and mendacity in place of common sense and logic.

For all of you who will mourn him in your own way, the most I have to offer (having been chosen to say goodbye to Isaac in this special venue that he called home for so long) is this one last anecdote of how he viewed himself and his imminent passage:

Janet was with him at the end, of course, and his daughter, Robyn. Janet told me, the day before he died, that toward the end Isaac had trouble speaking, could only manage a word or two from time to time. He would say *I love you* to Janet, and he would smile. But every once in a while he would murmur, "I want . . ." and never finish the sentence. "I want . . ."

And Janet would try to perceive what he needed, and she would say, "A drink of water?" or "Something to eat?" And Isaac would look dismayed, annoyed, chagrined that he couldn't put the sentence together; and after a moment he would let it slide, and forget he had spoken. Until the time came on the Sunday before he went back into the hospital for the last visit, when he managed to say, very clearly . . .

"I want . . . I want . . . Isaac Asimov."

And Janet told him he *was* Isaac Asimov, that he had *always* been Isaac Asimov. But he looked troubled. That wasn't what he meant. Then Janet remembered that Isaac had told her, some time ago, before he began to slip into abstraction and silence, that if there ever came a time when he didn't know who he was, if there came a time when his mind was not sharp, that he wanted to be let to go to sleep quietly, that extraordinary measures should not be taken.

And Janet understood that he was saying that he wanted to *be* Isaac Asimov again.

Then, in that final week before 2:30 am New York time on Monday, April 6th, he was holding Janet's hand, and he looked up at her and said, very clearly, the last he would ever say, "I *am* Isaac Asimov."

Yes, he was. Yes, indeed, he was.

— Harlan Ellison

* * *

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April 6, 1992: Isaac Asimov died last night. The phone hasn't stopped ringing, as newspapers and radio stations call in for my reactions. Their questions, and my answers, are all predictable, except for one. A woman from the *Detroit Free Press* asks: Was there anything Dr. Asimov *wasn't* interested in?"

I could only think of one thing. He didn't seem interested in dogs, at least in *my* two dogs, the one time we coaxed Janet and him up to Connecticut. Naturally the dogs loved him, and he put up with them good-naturedly, in between telling jokes at a cocktail party and giving a rousing speech at an environmental fair.

His science-fiction writing began in the 1940's in John Campbell's *Astounding*, but his career as an explainer of science began here, in the November 1958 issue. He was an editor's dream: never missed a deadline in 34 years, never even came close. He had only a vague idea about where commas went, but aside from that his prose needed little editing and was as clear and fast-moving as a mountain stream. He was a publisher's dream also. I was once sort of apologetic for giving him a tiny raise, and he wrote: "I write these articles out of love and not for money, and I would write them just as cheerfully for no fee at all . . . If I ever miss an issue, no reader could possibly be gloomier than I — although perhaps I wouldn't be gloomy at all, for as long as F&SF exists, the only reason I would ever miss would be a fatality or a near-fatality . . ."

What quality about him do you remember most, the callers ask. It had to be his infectious enthusiasm, his love for his work, his delight in explaining. Isaac got a little grouchy about answering dumb questions from readers in his last few years, but for most of his life he answered *every* query, and sometimes sent me copies of his responses. In 1966, a young man wrote and asked Isaac if he thought there was any purpose to life. This is how Isaac answered:

"As for the purpose of life — there may be none to begin with. After all, the Universe would continue just the same if there were no life in it. However, as long as we are here, we can *make* a purpose. We can gain the pleasure of understanding the Universe in which we find ourselves and helping others to do the same."

— Edward L. Ferman

* * *

Continued on inside back cover

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It began when Morn

Hyland came into Mallorys Bar and Sleep

with Angus Thermopyle... *She was gorgeous.*

In contrast, he was probably the most disreputable man who still had docking

rights at the station. *No one was surprised by the current which*

sparked across the crowd when she and Nick Succorso *first spotted each other.*

They left together to become the kind of story drunks and dreamers told each other when Mallorys was quiet

and the thin alloy walls seemed safe against the hard vacuum of space and the luring madness of the Gap.

That, of course, was not THE REAL STORY...

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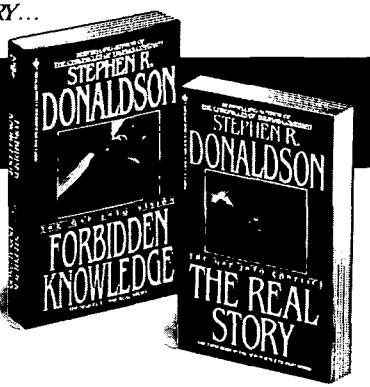

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BOOKS

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In The Net of Dreams, Wm. Mark Simmons, Popular Library, $4.50

When Dreams Collide, Wm. Mark Simmons, Popular Library, $4.99

TIM POWERS, as you are possibly tired of hearing from me, is a genius. And as you are possibly tired of hearing from me even further, a genius is marked by the fact that he or she never goes where you expected. But as I probably did not make sufficiently clear, that is the only real difference between a genius and all the other sorts of writer.

Geniuses come in all shades of literary ability, granting that below a certain point the genius turns to some other form of art. But given enough writing talent to make some sort of impression on the reader, above that point genius may be smooth, but it may just as apt be rough. It really doesn't matter. What counts is the ability to move the story into a realm that has never been entered before.

Some geniuses, of course, do this so clumsily that not many readers care to go along. But that is not to say, by a long shot, that this is not the reader's loss in some sense. It is simply to say that the verbal guidance through the story — or whatever it is — is difficult to follow. But this accounts for the fact that some writers — Theodore Dreiser is one, I think — are very much beloved by actually a fair number of intelligent readers, and greeted with puzzlement and/or indifference by a larger number of intelligent readers.

Then there are the geniuses whose mode of exploration includes the language itself. They are not to be confused with the clumsy writers; they are superb technicians of the written word. But they have gone beyond the use of words that everybody knows. In the milder form — in which the difficult words are retrievable with the aid of a large dictionary — we get Gene

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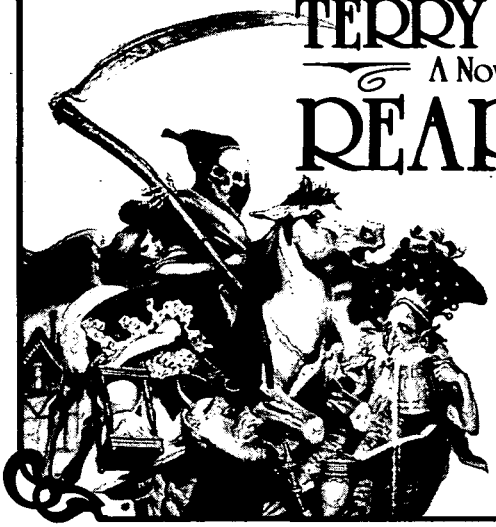
"It's mad, it's glorious, it's hilarious."—*Locus*

TERRY PRATCHETT

A Novel of Discworld

REAPER MAN



It's a wonderful afterlife...But if you can't take it with you, why go at all? Pondering the P's and Q's of the RIP business, Death goes AWOL. Resulting in the kind of Discworld chaos only Terry Pratchett can describe—to the delight of millions of his fans. "Consistently inventively mad...wild and wonderful!" —*Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*

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THE QUEEN'S SQUADRON

By R.M. MELUCH

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Wolfe. In the extreme case, we get James Joyce.

A thing about Tim Powers is that he is a superb technician of words, and you will, indeed, find him using unusual and made-up words . . . about two sentences' worth, in all the many sentences there are in *Last Call* . . . but never when the meaning is not nevertheless clear to the reader. It's just that when he came to that particular part of his book, he — Well, I don't know why he did it, do I? But had it been me, I wouldn't even have slowed down at the keyboard; the story demanded, for a little while, that I shade into an English that isn't, yet. I *imagine* that Powers felt that way about the appropriate part of his novel. Can't tell for sure — I'm not Tim Powers. But it seems likely.

At any rate, we are dealing with a man who does things with a book no sane craftsman would dream of attempting — including, toward the end of a harrowing and event-filled story of uncommon persuasiveness, introducing a sudden incursion of puns, which would be a disaster at anyone else's hands but which in the case of Powers working on *this* book, are exactly the right note at the right time.

Powers hits many right notes in this book. In what is already a long and spectacular career, this is very likely the best.

It is, of course, not really possible to tell, for the ages. Another thing about the works of a genius is that they change, with time. But I've never promised you that I can predict the future — nor can I so do. I have told you, over the years, what I think at the moment. And what I think at the moment is that the other Hugo and Nebula contenders had better watch out.

Yes, I will tell you something about the book, in due time. But not just yet.

What I will tell you first is the book is more likely fantasy than it is science fiction . . . if you believe the gods and godesses, and all that descends from them, are not real. But suppose, now, that you believed — in your heart of hearts, of course; not any place you have to show, or even look at — that *something* exists in this world that cannot be accounted for rationally, and of which the gods, etc., are but the convenient avatars, changing to a greater or lesser extent with the particular culture of the moment, but actually what is behind the gods is totally enduring. . . . Well, now, this book would be science fiction, wouldn't it?

It would be a scary kind of science fiction, of course, because it would be detailing exactly how you would go about arranging — or preventing — a situation in the real

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world which would condition how every one of us lived for the next thirty years or so. If one side won, things would be better; flowers would grow brighter and more numerous, we would stop killing good people, the price of food would drop. If any of the other sides won, it would be worse than it is already.

Well, you can plainly see, can't you, that this actually has to be a fantasy. And besides, it doesn't really make any difference anyway. It's still a terrifying book.

All right. The story takes place largely in Las Vegas, Nevada, although some of it is set in Santa Ana, California. And it is set, in the beginning, at the time Bugsy Siegel had built the Flamingo Hotel nine miles south of the populated part of Las Vegas, a castle in the desert, that made no sense to anyone else. Siegel is barely dead — shot, according to *Last Call*, by Georges Leon —but that is just an incident, in a way. Who Leon takes much more seriously as a target is his young son, Scot, whom he is planning to kill as the book opens.

Georges regrets this, in a way. He is irrationally fond of the boy. But it not only can't be helped, it *must* be done. Scot's older brother, Richard, is safely depersonalized now and is up on the roof, acting as Georges' eyes so as to keep watch for approaching enemies. But one pair is not enough, so Scot, too, must be wiped clean, and only a mobile husk left to stay on the roof, looking in the opposite direction, with Georges peeking through their empty skulls.

Donna interrupts. As the mother of the two boys, she had finally figured out what happened to Richard. She will not let the same thing happen to Scot. So, as Georges is bringing out the tarot deck, and preparing Scot — shortly after singing *Sonny Boy* with Scot one last time — Donna shoots Georges in a most delicate area, and flees with the boy in well-justified terror.

She does not get away from her pursuers, who are preternaturally swift and almost omnipresent. Nor is Scot unwounded. When Donna shot Georges, the tarot deck flew everywhere, and one of the cards lodged edge-on in Scot's right eyeball. But Donna manages to throw Scot, at a moment when all her pursuers are blinded, into a boat that is being towed by a passing car. In another few moments she is dead, the suicidal victim of a fiery car crash into the wall of an abandoned gas station on the Boulder Highway, but in so doing she convinces everyone that Scot died with her.

In actual fact, he survives, in Santa Ana, and grows to middle age in complete ignorance of his

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origins, or, obviously, of why Georges wanted to do that to him, since he does not remember Georges. Instead, he played poker for a living, under the tutelage of his foster-father, Oliver Crane, who also eventually fostered Diana under circumstances which are even stranger than his fostering of Scot. But some years ago he played a curious sort of poker on a houseboat, despite Oliver's pleading with him not to go.

In that game, he lost *something* — he's not clear what — and when he returned to his house, a quitclaim deed was tacked to the doorframe, and Oliver and Diana were gone . . . apparently forever, for he has not been able to find them since. And eventually he married, and took a mundane job, and had a special neighbor, Archimedes Mavranos, who — though Scot does not know this — sought him out specifically . . . and his wife died of sudden heart failure thirteen weeks ago, but he has told no one, and every once in a while — increasingly so — it seems that his wife is back.

And thus the modern portion of this book begins.

I will tell you no more. For one thing, the story is almost tirelessly convoluted, a fact which would be reflected in any synopsis. It does not matter when you are reading it — the narrative unfolds in its own way, and you simply drift through it, absolutely captivated, drawn along the book's narrative track with a sure-handed deftness of touch that is all the more compelling because you do not — you can not — realize how many things Powers is doing at once. Take my word for it — we are in the presence of an absolute master.

You may have come to this peroration late, and now be wondering exactly what I am talking about. I will try to help.

Some months ago, as these columns run, I began what has now probably ended — a study of the ways of genius in this field, as distinguished from merely excellent craftsmanship. Powers is one of those, because it is not possible to find a Powers book that is like any other book by anyone else. He is constantly breaking new ground — or, rather, he is constantly *creating* new ground. There are not many others, though there are some.

It is important to realize that is the *only* criterion. Powers — good as he is — has not always written a flawless book. This time I think he has (although, as I said or almost said, with the works of a genius it's hard to be sure). What makes Powers a genius is not that he always writes a flawless book; it is that he writes a book that creates new ground

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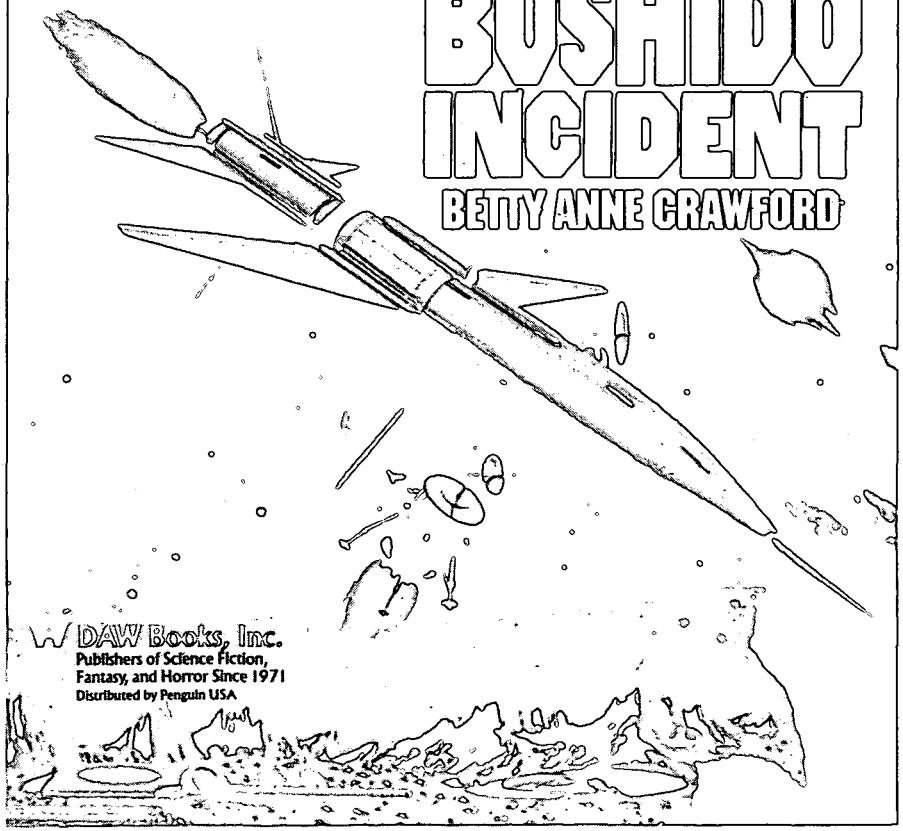
THE BUSHIDO INCIDENT

BETTY ANNE CRAWFORD



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which is immediately interesting, and, in the fullness of time, turns out to support additional books written at first by the best, most advanced craftsmen. Then by the second-rate craftsmen, and then by anyone. Powers himself will not pass this way again. He will be off breaking new ground.

If you care, I don't think Powers has any choice in the matter, any more than Wolfe or any of the others do. They can't write any other way. Probably some of them are yet too young, or too something, to realize there is any other way. But there is; not only is there another way, it pays considerably more. Trouble is, it's not for you. It will never be for you, and only future generations will see the difference between you and a mere craftsman, provided, of course, people are still reading.

Incidentally, one of the crucial differences will be that the craftsman's name will vanish as if by magic the moment he or she is dead and no longer producing. You, on the other hand, will continue to see fresh editions, and very likely be the figure around whom a cult is built. This does you no good, of course, but it is something to look forward to, I suppose.

And if you are looking for lyrical writing, I suggest you — the reader — need go no farther than the very last paragraph of this book. Perfect. Just absolutely perfect.

So. I went to Neocon two weeks ago (as I write these immortal lines). Neocon is in Wichita, Kansas, and — aside from the fact that Wichita is one of the most important cities of the air age, whereas New York, for instance, is simply one of the busiest — is only three years old. Which means, among other things, that it hasn't yet developed an attitude. It's just a con, and it just goes along, and everybody in it is a friend, more or less, of everybody else. I'm proud they asked me, and if at all possible I'll go back next year.

One of the features was a concert by Bill Simmons — who is known to you, if you read the first couple of lines of this column, as Wm. Mark Simmons. Simmons has a beautiful voice, and a mean twelve-string guitar, and he writes beautiful filk songs, some funny and some not. Now, I don't like the circle format of players and singers that has developed in filk,* and I don't

*Somebody once typoed folk singing when writing about science fiction fannish folk singing, and it has stuck. Filking is (now) the overformal presentation of original or borrowed material with an SF theme. You will find the filkers gathered in their own room at conventions, and every huckster (dealers) room at every convention carries tapes of filkers.

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like many filk renditions. Bill is different. Him I'll listen to, gladly, any time I can. And it turns out that he had a couple of books on the market, so I —But the rest is obvious.

In *In The Net of Dreams*, which came out in 1990, the story is a science fiction premise — virtual reality, with improvements — given a fantasy twist, in that the "reality" into which the customers of this commercialized enterprise slip is a fantasy world, complete with gorgons, pegassii, warlocks, wood nymphs, and even the ex-wife of Robert Ripley, the master programmer who created it. Ripley is now the crippled survivor of an air car crash, and not particularly in the good graces of the company that runs the reality. But they have to send him into it when it turns out that several people, including several important people from the American government and the Russian government are stuck in it and can't get out.

This book, by the way, is a *Locus* recommended book, so you don't have to take just my word for it that it's worth reading — in part for the outrageous puns that crop up from time to time.

When Dreams Collide is out recently. Once again Ripley has to go into the Matrix to extract somebody. Only this time it's somebody he thought he got the first time, and certainly somebody who's out and about — running for president of the U.S., as a matter of fact — at the same time he's still in the Matrix. This one also involves several Ripleys, as it turns out.

I think the second book is even more outrageous, and more fun, than the first. I'm really glad I went to Neocon.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

More Shapes than One, Fred Chappell (St. Martin's, cloth, 208pp, $17.95)

FRED CHAPPELL is an odd hybrid indeed — a literary writer who manages to win prizes like the Bollingen and the French Academy's Best Foreign Novel award, and yet does not feel obliged to conceal in any way his love for science fiction and fantasy. Indeed, he teaches a course in it, and far from the normal academic practice of praising only those books which least resemble sf and most resemble academic-literary fiction, he understands and loves sf for what it is and what it does best.

Which is either the cause of or caused by the fact that most of his fiction is suffused with the immanence of magic. When he's writing about the life of southern country folk, this can be taken as the attitude of the characters themselves. But in this story collection, *More Shapes than One*, we are face to face with wonderful fantasy that doesn't pretend to be anything else. And because Chappell is secure in his own credentials as a literary writer, he doesn't waste any effort trying to prove to us how artsy he is, the way sf writers with literary pretensions so often do. He just has a story to tell and he tells it. It's a voice like you've never heard before, except now and then when there's a hint of an echo of a good translation of a Latin American magic realist.

In fact, that's not a bad comparison, Chappell's fantasies and magic realism. Like the Latin Americans, Chappell has a tendency to think that just showing us the arresting strangeness of the idea is enough, where a science fiction writer would generally know that the strange idea is only the starting point for the story. However, there's only a few of Chappell's stories that go nowhere; most go farther than you'd ever imagine. Indeed, the best surprise in the book is that you don't have to have literary pretensions to enjoy it. Chappell isn't writing to the professors and their acolytes — he's writing to folks like us, who just want a good story full of wonder

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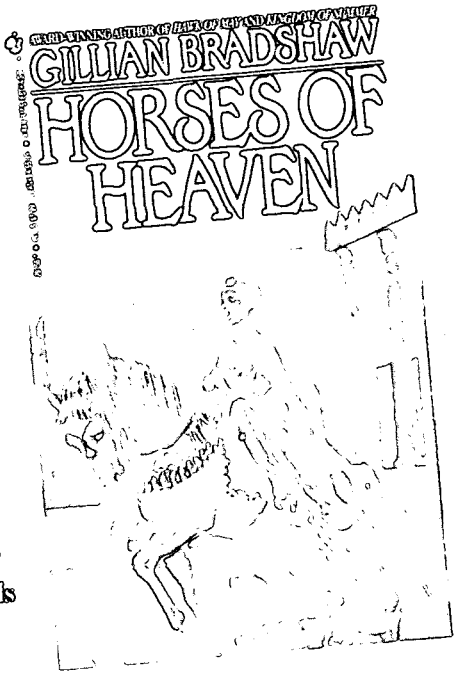
"Exciting and mythically resonant – history spiced with fantasy in just the right measure."
–Kirkus Reviews



The time: the second century. The place: Ferghana, where only a few generations before, Alexander the Great halted in his eastern conquest. Princess Helioklela is the beautiful young bride offered to the aging Ferghanan King Mauakes when he seeks a peaceful alliance with his ancient enemies, the Bactrian Greeks. But in her strange new home, Helioklela finds herself torn between her duty and her heart – and caught at the center of a struggle for power which only the gods may decide.

A story of magic, intrigue, and legendary love by the author of the Arthurian trilogy *Hawk of May*, *Kingdom of Summer* and *In Winter's Shadow*

516 pp. $5.99/$6.99C.

SPECTRA BANTAM

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and truth where you care what comes of it all.

I've got my favorites, of course. The strange ancient book that sucks the life out of any book that's put near it on the shelf. The woman who dies of joy when the owners of the human race at last come back to check up on their property. The frontiersman who doesn't hold much with the woman trade and winds up freeing a string of them who were being led off to market. The dream that got substantial and is blocking traffic on a rural highway until a deputy sheriff licks his pencil tip and writes a poem to put the dream to rest. The strange plant that a sailor sent to Linnaeus, which thrives briefly in his laboratory, only to be forgotten.

Not every story is explicitly fantastic or science fictional. But they all have at least a slantwise connection with our literature of the strange. For instance, "Ladies from Lapland" may be realistic enough, but it is nevertheless a story about the collision of alien races, first with love and then in gathering distaste. Not every story is successful, either — in one tale he gets sort of carried away with gimmicks, but at least it's short. I won't tell you you'll love every story in the book. But I *will* say that when you're done with the whole thing you'll be glad to have that book on your shelf, and even gladder to have Fred Chappell's sweet and searing stories in your memory.

A. Merritt, *The Face in the Abyss* (Donald M. Grant, P.O. Box 187, Hampton Falls NH 03844, cloth, 286pp, color and b&w ill. by Ned Dameron, trade $30, artist-signed edition $60); *The Aenei of Virgil* (Donald M. Grant [see above], cloth, 308pp, color and b&w ill. by Luis Ferreira)

A. Merrit's *The Face in the Abyss* may be the first sf novel I read, back when I was too young to know anything more than that I couldn't wait to turn to the next page and find out what happened next. Since it's older than science fiction itself, as a category, Merrit didn't keep any kind of distinction between sf and fantasy, and maybe that's part of the reason why I never cared much for the distinction myself, and have a hard time comprehending what some people get so upset about when they whine that fantasy is polluting science fiction or vice versa, as if one of them was diseased and the other one was pure. Heck, folks, both sides have the same disease already, and I for one am glad to be infected.

This luscious edition by Donald M. Grant is too heavy to read in bed, unless you don't mind a three-

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inch declivity in your chest, but it's a wonderful way to experience the tale even if you have to sit up at the table to read it. And sometimes Dameron's illustrations owe a bit too much to Kelly Freas and sometimes not enough. But if you love books as artifacts and not just for the words they contain, this one is beautiful indeed.

I'm considerably happier with Ferreira's work in illustrating *The Aeneid* — no hint of the pulp tradition here! — and this book is, if anything, even more delicious. I only wish I loved the poem itself. It always felt too derivative to me, just another expression of Roman envy of the great works of the Greeks. I think the difference may be that Homer (or whoever; don't write to me about this) believed in the gods he sang of, while Virgil was more sophisticated. Homer never read Plato, you see, and Virgil did; being educated has killed more storytellers. Anyway, I never caught the sense from the Aeneid that it was believed in. Rather it always seemed more like somebody manipulating tropes from somebody else's story. Like *Sword of Shannara* compared to *Lord of the Rings*. The spark of life just isn't there.

Of course, I don't speak Latin, either. In this case, though, I don't think there's anything wrong with the translation. Perhaps it lacks energy, but *is* there such a thing as energetic Virgil? What it has is smoothness and fluidity, and a simple plainness that makes it possible to read the poem aloud and have it understood. So, keeping in mind that I'm not a Virgilian, you must realize that it's high praise indeed when I report to you that I reread far more of the poem than I intended. If you already love *The Aeneid* or have wanted to give it a try, this is certainly the loveliest form in which I've ever seen the poem presented.

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We begin this issue with a wonderful science fiction story set in China. In 1854, China was near the end of a period of foreign expansion. When the Manchus conquered China in 1644, they opened the doors to Europeans. The Europeans sought raw materials, markets for products, and opium. The United States also traded with China, and like other "Christian" nations, sent missionaries. Stephen Kraus, whose stories have appeared in Analog, Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, *and in best-of-the-year anthologies, examines this world, as exotic and fascinating as any new world.*

IN THE LAND OF GRASS

By Stephen Kraus

May 1, 1854

I DEPART IN A FEW DAYS' time for the grasslands north of the Great Wall. I have leave from my bishop to announce the gospel to the Tartar tribes — given grudgingly, I might add. He suspects my motives.

My only companion is a young convert, Sambhodha, a Manchu, a wanderer. He has spent the last two months with me, teaching me the local customs and the rudiments of the Tatar language.

Even for so small a party as ours, the preparations are daunting. I acquired a camel and have learned to make it kneel. I am, however, confounded in my attempts to secure a load to its back in such a way that it does not shake loose after a few plodding steps. Nonetheless, I am anxious to set out. I find life at the Peking mission — beneath my bishop's rheumy eye and the compound's low, dark ceilings — stifling. My calling

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is all but inaudible here.

May 2, 1854

AN AMERICAN presented himself at the mission today and inquired after me. He seemed to prefer the shadows of our ill-lit reception room, keeping to its corners. His clothing was nondescript (a dun-colored cloak and boots). Even so, his appearance made a strong impression on me. He was unusually tall and broad — the room seemed barely to contain him — and he had dark hair that he brushed straight back from a forehead as high and flat as a wall. His angular face had an inflexible, brutal cast to it. He reminded me of someone, though I cannot think who just now; it may be only that brutality is always, regrettably, familiar.

"You're Evariste Gabet?" he asked in a peculiar, lilting English.

I nodded.

"You're traveling to Mongolia?"

"To Tatary, yes."

"Do you have a specific route in mind?"

He had yet to introduce himself.

I shook my head. "I know in a general way where the centers of commerce are located. I intend to travel between them, perhaps establishing a mission in one or more. I have an excellent map furnished by *Monsieur* Andriveau-Goujon."

The man laughed in a harsh, almost contemptuous way. "I'll go with you. Maybe I can keep you pointed in the right direction."

I was taken aback at this. I knew nothing about the man. "Sir," I said, "perhaps you would be good enough to tell me your name before we become traveling companions."

Impatiently: "Adler."

I bowed slightly. "May I inquire what your interest in my modest expedition might be, Mr. Adler?"

"I have business in Mongolia."

"Commerce of some description?"

He was silent for a moment. "I'm looking for someone."

"A friend, perhaps?" The man's manner irritated me, made me more inquisitive than usual.

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He moved to the mantel, so that the light struck him at last. He was almost shockingly pale; the contrast of his face with his dark hair was extreme. I wondered for a moment if he was ill. He picked up a Sung figurine from the mantel and studied it. There was a deliberateness to his motions that bespoke violence barely held in check. I feared that he might crush the figure to shards at any moment.

"A criminal," he said.

"You are a. . . ." I searched for the American phrase. "A police officer, then?"

"Yes."

I nodded. Although I had reason to question many of the things Adler told me, I felt certain enough of this answer.

"I plan to be gone for a year or more," I said.

He shrugged. "I'll catch a southbound caravan at some point."

I came near to refusing him. His mission is incompatible with my own. But something in Adler — some expectation, some potential I saw in him — stilled my tongue. He gave me his address, that of the Dutch mission hospital here, and asked that I contact him on the eve of my departure. I said nothing, and my opportunity to avoid his company passed as our Chinese footman showed him out through the low oak door.

May 8, 1854

SAMBHODHA RIDES at the head of our caravan on a gray donkey. Adler and I follow perched on swaying camels. The combined effect is perfectly ridiculous, though no one we encounter seems to find our passage at all remarkable.

After only three days, the routine of travel has lent a sameness to the landscape and our daily tasks. The morning fog softens the precarious green of the farmlands and renders the general poverty of the region almost picturesque. The land is perfectly flat, though it seems to slope very gradually upward in the direction we travel. All is cultivated, however poorly. There is no such thing as a tree or shrub, lest it shade some few square feet of productive land.

Adler keeps his own company. I hear him speak only when he curses his camel. As I feared, his companionship is of little value. His un-

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familiarity with the Chinese language is puzzling, since he must have spent some weeks traveling to Peking, presumably alone. I inquired about this after tea.

"How did you arrive in China?" I asked. "At Shanghai? Or Canton, perhaps?"

"No," he said after a moment.

"From Foochow, then?"

He shook his head.

"I suppose you dropped into Peking from the sky?"

He smiled at this, the first time he demonstrated himself so capable —though it was only a twitch at the corners of his mouth. "More or less."

My journey already seems long and joyless.

May 11, 1854

THROUGH THE Great Wall today, a tumbled-down heap of gigantic bricks in this locality; certainly not the impassable barrier I had imagined. Our camels picked their way gravely among the ruins.

By degrees we pass beyond the limits of cultivation and enter the grasslands of Tatary. Its emptiness is profound: smooth hills covered by a carpet of yellow grass. Dusty tracks winding forever beneath an arch of seamless blue.

The Chinese, Sambhodha informs me, call it *Tsao-ti*. The land of grass.

May 15, 1854

SAMBHODHA SHAVED my head this morning and wrapped me in the yellow robes of a lama. The process distressed him, while at the same time providing endless amusement for Adler. Sambhodha feels I have compromised the solemnity of my office. But I must seem understandable to these people if my mission is to meet with any success.

Tonight we came to a Mongol inn, a square enclosure formed of poles and brushwood with a tall mud house at its center. A cheerful man with a round face and lidless eyes took our beasts and bade us to enter. Adler muttered something about the smoke and stench that issued from

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within, but Sambhodha inhaled deeply and rushed inside as if he had at last returned home after his years of wandering.

A platform covered with a reed mat filled most of the inn's single room. Several men comfortably arranged on it looked up at our arrival. All had the wide, flat nose and bronze skin that bespoke a Tartar heritage.

I regarded them warmly. Here, at last, were the people who would restore my calling. Here was a downtrodden race I could free, however incompletely, from their ignorance and their subjugation.

Our host showed us to a table so low we were obliged to sit cross-legged. He served us black Russian tea from a copper pot. Adler looked sullenly at the stained table, showing no curiosity about our surroundings. But our fellow wayfarers inundated us with questions about our travels. One with a ragged black beard and a braided queue that reached nearly to his waist asked:

"Sir lama, from what quarter of Heaven do you come?"

"From the West," I answered.

"From Tibet?"

"Farther still."

His smooth brow furrowed with the strain of imagining a place farther west than Tibet.

"Truly," said another man, "wisdom grows greater with every step toward the setting sun."

He meant that the doctrine of Buddhism grows purer with nearness to the lamaseries of Tibet and India. But I answered: "Until we have come round the world again to where our journey began, no wiser than before."

Both men laughed uproariously, though neither had the remotest idea of my meaning.

Through all this, Adler frowned as he sipped his scalding tea, politely ignored by the assembled company. At one point he shook Sambhodha by the shoulder — the convert had been chatting volubly with a neighbor —and said:

"Do they have anything with alcohol?"

This required some explanation from me. At length the innkeeper produced a bowl of hot fermented milk. Adler took a tentative sip and grimaced, but kept sipping until the bowl was empty. He called for another, and another after that.

I had hopes that the spirit might improve Adler's disposition, but it

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had the opposite effect. His motions became abrupt and exaggerated, his rare conversation immoderate. When one of our neighbors asked for a draft, Adler wrapped his arms around his bowl and leaned over it, staring malevolently at the startled traveler.

At length the innkeeper beat his wooden drum to frighten off the wolves and tigers, and we withdrew to our small rooms of rough timber and beaten dirt. Adler stumbled a bit and paused at our door to remove a smooth, shiny instrument from his cloak. He held it up to take advantage of the moonlight. He pointed it to the northeast and grunted in satisfaction before retiring.

My repose was more troubled. As the glow of the evening faded, I could only reflect that the Tartars I had met seemed the most content and carefree of people. What could I offer them? Who in this land truly needs my help and my compassion.

May 22, 1854

THE DAYS grow together, lacking anything to distinguish one from the other. We roll up our blue linen tent in the morning, eat bowls of oatmeal steeped in tea, kneel our camels. I let Adler choose our route — always to the northeast — as *M.* Andriveau-Goujon's map has proven less than reliable. Sometimes Adler stops to shoot some fowl or small game for dinner. This is the only activity he relishes. His fowling piece, of some American manufacture, seems uncommonly accurate.

Today we saw the circular linen *ghurrs* of another caravan, and we stopped to pay our respects.

"*Amor*," I said to the bearded gentlemen who greeted us. *Peace.*

The caravan had lost an animal, and I was asked to cast a horoscope in hopes of divining its whereabouts. This I refused as graciously as I could manage.

"What are they asking?" Adler wanted to know.

When I explained, he laughed loudly.

"What do they use? Pig entrails? Tea leaves?"

Sambhodha answered: "In the land of grass, they read the future in arrangements of sheep droppings."

Adler laughed even louder than before.

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Later we came across a solitary horseman, galloping furiously, moving with a fluidity I would have thought impossible unless horse and rider were joined, like a centaur.

Adler said: "Ask him if he knows a woman with very pale skin and a small nose and hair the color of copper."

I looked at him, surprised. "This criminal you seek is a woman?"

Adler nodded impatiently.

The rider stopped near us and clasped his hands across his forehead in greeting.

"Has peace accompanied your progress?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered. "We have indeed journeyed in all tranquility."

"Are your flocks and herds flourishing?"

And so on for half an hour or more. But the man had no news of the woman Adler seeks.

May 24, 1854

IN THE crevasses between hills, I see moon-shapes of wrinkled snow, lingering even as summer approaches. The days are quite warm now, but the mornings are still freezing; I shall have to purchase furs when we reach Dolon-nor. This is a luxury I can allow myself. The silver coins the bishop dispensed so parsimoniously on my departure stretch seemingly forever in Tatary. I have thoughts of money to spare upon my return to France — money that can afford me the time I need to write the memoirs of these journeys. I have no doubt but that they shall bring me some renown, for who is not curious about so distant and esoteric a land as Tatary? Indeed, watching the sun seep into the yellow hills that mark the horizon, I feel my calling evaporate. I imagine myself speaking before learned bodies in Paris and London, telling enthralled audiences of itinerant musicians playing three-stringed harps, and of wild camels glimpsed at sunrise licking saltpeter from the margins of poisonous lakes.

My ambitions grow by the day with nothing to check them, and I have only this journal as a confessor.

* * *

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May 28, 1854

WE SPENT the night in an inn that stank of rancid mutton fat, a smell that clings to everything in Tatary. Only with difficulty could I convince Adler to enter, and he called for his goat's-milk wine before we had even been properly seated.

Adler's capacity matches his stature, but as the evening deepened and the wolves' calls rose in the hills around the lake, his speech became thick and ill-considered. He gestured for more, and I suggested that he desist.

"I can still smell them," he said sourly, surveying the inn's guests. "Deserve extinction, these people."

"Pardon?" I said.

"Chinese relocation. Started under Mao, I think. Millions of Chinese moved into Inner Mongolia and Tibet. No ethnic Mongols left. Serves them right. Barbaric culture — no culture at all, really."

No ethnic Mongols left in Inner Mongolia? A dozen or more round-faced gentlemen of the purest possible Mongol stock surrounded us, smoking and drinking black tea. I chose not to debate the point.

One of our neighbors leaned toward us and offered a pinch of snuff from his leather pouch. I accepted, out of politeness. Adler waved his hand disdainfully.

He told me: "Ask him about the woman."

I did so, and the traveler said: "A woman with skin as pale as yours manages the Russian trading station in Dolon-nor."

Adler leaned forward. "Her eyes, are they slate gray? Does she stand very straight?"

I translated. The trader nodded.

"You know her well, then," I said to Adler.

"She's my wife."

I gaped, astonished, having believed that Adler could no longer astonish me. "You pursue your own wife? What was her crime?"

He waved as he had to the offer of snuff. "You wouldn't understand."

Adler went on drinking, indeed with even greater vigor than before. But I was very much disturbed by this conversation. Is my companion a madman? Does he mean to harm this woman? I reproach myself for my part in furthering his objectives, for proceeding contrary to my own best

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judgment. Yet I can hardly abandon Adler here in the wilderness of Tatary. Nor can I return to Peking now, my mission a humiliating failure. No, I see no choice but to press on and rid myself of Adler as soon as I am able.

Despite everything, I find myself wondering what the wife of such a man must be like. The picture in my mind is vague — a quiet, self-effacing woman, driven by desperation to an act that even Adler found intolerable.

Already, knowing nothing, my sympathies are with her and not her pursuer.

June 1, 1854

DOLON-NOR FORMED gradually in the blue distance, precipitating from the cool, bright air as a huddle of low buildings at the foot of a hill surmounted by a gilt-roofed lamasery.

Proximity was disillusioning, as is so often the case. The streets are narrow and winding and filled with a deep, pungent slime. Walking on the footpath found on either side, it is not unusual to observe a small animal hopelessly mired, its death struggles ignored by passersby until it gradually becomes part of the general corruption.

We established ourselves at the Inn of the Three Perfections upon our arrival. I expected derisive comments from Adler on the inappropriateness of its name, but he seemed distracted. We set off almost immediately.

Reaching the town center, Adler made straight for the market square. Dozens of merchants sat in the doorways of dark shops, their saddles and bundles of hornbeam wood and inverted fowls aggressively displayed.

"Ask where I can find Russian goods," Adler told me.

We were directed to an adjacent street. Adler waved Sambhodha and me back as we rounded the corner.

Ignoring his instructions, I stepped over a rivulet of sewage and approached a table displaying bolts of linen, bundles of tobacco leaves, and black tea pressed into small bricks. Two figures, one tall and broad, the other slight, stood to one side. Both wore loose cloaks that hid their faces. They seemed to be wrestling — they held each other's wrists so that their long sleeves covered their hands.

A chicken screeched somewhere, and one of the figures looked up. The hood of her cloak slipped back to reveal a young woman with red hair tied

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back in a braid.

Adler moved forward in a rush. He grabbed the second, larger figure and pushed him to the ground.

"Get your hands off her!" he yelled in English.

The tall man looked up, uncomprehending.

I stepped forward. "They were bargaining. They touch each other's hands to make offers and counteroffers. No one can see. . . ."

Adler paid no attention. He stood opposite the woman and looked into her gray eyes. She made a small cry and put her hand to her mouth.

"I'm taking you back," Adler said.

I felt stricken. So this was his wife? She looked delicate, almost fragile. She shared Adler's pallor and fine, angular features, but there was nothing of his hardness in her. She regarded him with a quiet sadness that pierced me to the heart.

She made no protest, gave no answer at all. Shivering a little, she collected a few belongings from the back of the shop and gave instructions in fluent Tatar to a shambling assistant. Adler took her arm and led her back toward our inn.

We moved slowly through the city, attracting curious stares from the townspeople. At one corner, Adler released her so we could follow a narrow footpath. She looked at a side passage, hesitating, her body coiled.

"I can always find you," Adler said. He spoke casually, but his words froze the air around them.

The tension drained from her. She stumbled slightly and followed him quietly thereafter.

We were back in the inn before I had the opportunity to introduce Sambhodha and myself. Her name was Lis, I discovered (Adler had never mentioned it), and she spoke with the same lilting accent her husband affected.

"Westerners are rare enough here," I said. "It surprises me that my mission in Peking was unaware of your presence in Dolon-nor."

She gave me an ironic smile. "I've tried to remain inconspicuous. I thought I'd found the most remote spot on earth."

Not remote enough, it seemed.

"Still, you cannot be completely unhappy to be leaving such a place as Dolon-nor."

Her eyes grew distant. "You can always love a place where you've been

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free."

She seemed so weary, so resigned. I felt a rush of sympathy for her —and anguish for the part I had played in finding her. "How long have you been here?"

"A year. Almost a year." She looked away. Her profile was striking: sharply etched lines in a land of blunt features. "At first I expected to see him at any moment, each time I opened a door, turned a corner. Then less and less — but I still woke up at every sound. Now it's finally happened, and I don't feel anything, really. Just empty. Lost."

Adler ignored both of us, instead negotiating with our host for wine.

I wavered. It was none of my affair, but I still felt too much blame. "Why do you follow him?"

"What he said — it's true. He can always find me. I can't ever escape him."

The innkeeper brought Adler his wine, and tea for the others of us. Lis drank with both hands wrapped around the crude cup in the local manner. Her face looked terribly pale behind the rising steam.

"We'll return to Peking in the morning," Adler announced.

"Have you found another caravan, then?" I asked, surprised.

"No. You'll have to turn around."

I felt Lis watching me. I stiffened. "I will do no such thing. I remind you that I have a mission. My itinerary takes me elsewhere."

"Where?"

In truth, this was rather vague. I had only M. Andriveau-Goujon's miserable map to guide me. "To the north. Toward Ulan Bator."

Adler glared, clearly unused to being thwarted. "Will you at least wait here until I can find some damned camels headed south?"

I was about to decline, but Lis squeezed my hand beneath the low table. Her eyes were huge and luminous in this dark place.

I found myself unable to refuse her.

"Very well. For a few days, while I reprovision."

I retired early to my windowless square of dirt and straw. Lis and Adler shared a room at the far end of the inn. I spent a restless night wondering what might be passing between them.

* * *

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June 2, 1854

THIS MORNING was very cold. The innkeeper's son stoked the fire beneath the copper caldron that supplied tea, washing-up water, and every other necessity. Lis sat in one corner, wrapped in a blue cloak. Her presence drove the chill from me in an instant.

"You rise early," I said, shuffling forward awkwardly, not knowing how close she might let me approach.

"I had hopes of warm water."

I indicated the innkeeper's boy. "Another moment should suffice."

She nodded. "You're buying things for your journey?"

"Yes."

"I could help you. I know the merchants here."

"Adler would trust you to return?"

She nodded again. "He knows he can always find me."

The hopelessness of her reply exasperated me. "How can he find you in so vast and empty a place as Tatary?"

Sambhodha arrived just then, cheerful and bustling, permitting Lis to turn our conversation gracefully to other matters. Once again I had no answers. What was her crime? What hold did Adler have over her?

We set off after a few minutes. The sky was like a tide of blue. We shook off the stench of mutton fat and bitter tea and made for the market square. A small caravan passed us, headed into town from the south. Dust had turned the riders the same color as their camels.

"You know these people," I said to Lis. "What compels them? Why do they travel so?"

We walked side by side. Sambhodha followed, leading his donkey with our satchels slung over its back.

"This world means nothing to them," she said. "That's why they have so few possessions, build no houses. They only pass through this life."

"Frightening," I said.

She looked at me, startled. "No, it's beautiful. It's the most perfect freedom imaginable."

"Would you give up so much, just to be free?"

She seemed to study my face, trying to judge my character perhaps. "Your mission here may be more difficult than you imagine."

I smiled. "I have already found it so."

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She looked at me more closely still. "What compels *you*? Is there a shortage of souls to save among your countrymen?"

"Hardly." I stopped walking. Something about her gaze told me she would see through any deception. "My ambitions here are worldly enough. I plant to traverse this land and then return to France, write my memoirs — I imagine myself sitting beside a pond with water lilies, pen in hand."

"Water lilies. Like Monet?"

"Like who?"

She turned away quickly. "Someone I know. It's not important."

We resumed walking. She seemed satisfied with my reply; and yet I did deceive her. I failed to speak of my calling, of the pain its absence caused me, of my despairing hopes of hearing it once again.

So each of us had our secrets.

"Why here?" I asked. "Why Dolon-nor?"

"I was a . . . historian, specializing in Mongolia. I've always wanted to come here. I just traveled for a while. When I arrived in Dolon-nor, I met the woman who ran the Russian trading station. She wanted to go home —to Irkutsk, I think. I agreed to take over for her, until the company sent someone new." She smiled. "They never did."

We walked on for a few minutes without speaking. I heard bells, and traced their sounds to the lamasery that overlooked the town. The notes had a warm clarity in the thin, dry air, a negation of distance. Lis paused to listen.

"They make the most beautiful bells in the world here."

The pain in her voice struck me, drew me closer to her. I almost whispered: "What will he do to you?"

"He'll take me back with him."

"Nothing else? He told me you were a criminal."

The morning was warming, and Lis unfastened her fur coat absently. Beneath it she wore a long, shapeless tunic decorated with the fine embroidery of the region. The dress touched her body as she walked, briefly outlining the curve of a thigh, a hip, a slim shoulder.

"I came here without authorization," she said.

So Adler pursued her over five thousand miles of ocean and a thousand more of wilderness to redress a passport violation? He was right: I failed utterly to understand.

Lis said nothing more, but quickened her pace until I fell a step behind

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her, as if my questions could serve no purpose but to drive her away.

Watching her boots raise bursts of dust, I tried to imagine Lis sipping tea in a Paris salon, dressed in crinoline, shoulders bare, a fine gold chain rising and falling on the pale skin of her neck. I shook my head. The scene refused to come to life for me. She belonged to a different world.

Our shopping was complete by evening. To Sambhodha's mortification, Lis set about lashing our new provisions into bundles far more efficiently than he or I had ever been able to manage.

With the donkey piled high, we returned to the inn to find Adler already drinking his goat's-milk wine. I switched rooms with Sambhodha on some pretext so that mine would adjoin Lis and Adler's. His voice was audible through the wall we shared. Drink exaggerated his odd accent —he was quite incomprehensible — but I could make out the single word that Lis said in reply. She said: *no.*

June 5, 1854

THE NEXT morning, Adler asked to accompany me as far north as the Yellow River, where the chances of meeting a southbound caravan were greater.

As always, I came to regret my involvement with his plans almost immediately. He dictates where we travel; he sits infuriatingly inert in the evenings as Lis feeds the fire in front of their tent.

My only solace is in the walks Lis and I take to gather dried dung for the fire. This evening we climbed a gentle slope toward the sunset. We alarmed a goat and watched it leap out of sight. I spoke of its nimbleness, but Lis only remarked, wistfully: "It doesn't leave any tracks."

We reached the top of the ridge as the enormous red sun touched the hills.

"How far can we see?" she asked.

We were both wrapped in furs, but I was terribly conscious of her nearness. I did a rough calculation. "Forty or fifty miles."

"Not as far as Hsi-fan?"

I smiled. "Not nearly so far."

"Hsi-fan is all bamboo forests now — there're still giant pandas there. I've always wanted to see one."

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I felt a rush of warmth for her. I wanted to carry her away, take her to Hsi-fan's mist-covered hills, bring her ice-shrouded yellow poppies, build a house out of bamboo a thousand miles from Adler, a thousand miles from bishops and missions and dust-covered caravans.

And I thought: I love this woman.

I closed my eyes. The knowledge was sterile, academic; as useless as the hatred I felt for Adler.

A wind swept up from the valley. Unconsciously, I leaned forward, straining to hear it. The expression on my face must have turned abstract.

Lis asked me: "Did you hear something?"

I shook my head. "An affectation of mine. Forgive me."

This only made her more curious. "What were you listening for?"

I walked a small way ahead. I saw no way to evade her. "I was listening for my calling," I said.

"Your calling? Really? What are you called to?"

I spoke slowly, examining each word before I said it. "To . . . lift people out of their misery and their enslavement."

She laughed softly. "Only a priest could be that ambitious."

I shook my head. "There is nothing religious in my calling, nothing at all. It was something I felt in my boyhood."

"Why become *Père* Gabet, then?"

"My father was a weaver. What other opportunity did I have for education, for influence? There was only the Church."

I watched long shadows fill the valley. "I have never spoken to anyone of this."

She let me continue.

"I ran an errand for my father once. As I passed a public square in the town where we lived, I saw a boy being beaten by an older man. The man seemed less enraged than . . . methodical. His expression never changed. I think the child must have been half-witted. There was a helplessness, an *acceptance* in his manner that infuriated me.

"I did nothing. I moved on and completed my errand. I loathed myself for that. Then, when I was near sleep that night, I heard my calling."

I spoke quietly. She moved nearer to hear me.

"I knew it was the wind outside my window, but it sounded like a voice, speaking to me alone.

"I made my vows, became a novice. I worked in a hospital for two years,

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then a school. My calling eroded — the monotony of human suffering wore it away. I succumbed to the vanity of missionary work, the notoriety a diary of my travels might bring. . . ."

I stared at the ground. "But I still remember the voice I heard when I was a boy. I feel numb without it. My life lacks a shape, lacks any passion. I thought perhaps, among these people, I might hear it again."

She took my hand. "Have you?"

Her touch made me tremble. "No. They have no need of any help I could provide."

"I'm sorry."

I nodded. It occurred to me that we should start back before the way became too dark. But I hesitated. "One more thing."

"Yes."

"The man I saw beating his son all those years ago. I recall his face perfectly. It was very pale and angular with a high, flat forehead. Just like Adler's."

And, saying that, I finally understood why I had accepted Adler's companionship in the dark anteroom of our Peking mission. I was waiting for the savagery that lay so close to the surface in him to boil up, to explode into a violent act that might reawaken my calling. A foolish, unworthy hope. But I have no other.

June 7, 1854

THE DAY began ill-omened.

I met Adler early in the morning, pacing in front of his tent.

"You seem agitated," I said mildly.

"You're traveling too slowly. We're a day behind at least."

I raised an eyebrow. "I was unaware we were keeping to so precise a schedule."

He spat on the ground. "We need to cover at least thirty miles today."

The mildness passed from my voice. "In the event you have failed to notice, we are amidst steep hills and ravines. Such a pace would brutalize our animals."

"I don't give a shit about your camels. I have an . . . appointment in the north. I don't intend to miss it."

An appointment? With whom? I looked at the rough emptiness that

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surrounded us. I found it impossible to imagine that a day more or less could make any difference. I shrugged and turned away, dismissing this latest of Adler's absurdities. But he reached out and seized the material of my yellow cloak. His face was abruptly an inch from mine.

"Do as I say."

Adler's eyes held mine for another moment, then he pushed me away and strode back to his tent.

A minute passed before I could catch my breath, and another before my fury subsided. I examined myself for the spark Adler's violence should have struck. I found nothing.

We loaded our beasts and set off without another word. We crossed grassy valleys and skirted copses of trees with lush undergrowth that might conceal tigers or any sort of wild beast. We passed files of collapsing straw pillars — archery targets, Sambhodha informed me — and in the afternoon we paused in a narrow defile to let our camels graze while we rested and collected water. Remounting, we set dozens of foxes to flight in the rocks above us. Distracted, I failed to notice the ragged band of dark, bearded men issue from a side canyon until they were fully upon us, wielding sabers and pikes.

"Venerable elder brother," the broadest of them said to me with a cool politeness. "We are on foot. Would you be good enough to lend us your camels?"

I was at first unable to answer, my attention fixed on the sunburned face with its unruly shrub of beard and the greasy skin hat.

I heard similar words being spoken to the others of my party, and I tore my gaze away from the bandit, looking for Lis. Instead, I saw Adler holding a black tube no thicker than his thumb. A crackling blue incandescence issued from its hollow end and struck one of the bandits in the chest. Where the light touched, flesh vanished. The man fell without a word.

Adler turned his weapon on the wretches one by one. They attempted to flee at first, then to grovel in a futile plea for mercy. In a matter of a minute or less, six corpses lay sprawled in the dust. The air stank of charred flesh mixed with the sharp, metallic smell of the sky after a flash of lightening.

In the intense silence that followed, Adler hid the black tube in the folds of his cloak and began shouting instructions to Sambhodha. The lilt in his voice was more pronounced than I had ever heard it.

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Dutifully — for once I had no thought of contradicting him — Sambhodha piled the bodies and set them aflame. They caught fire almost immediately, as if these creatures of the desert had flesh as dry as fallen leaves.

"Don't talk about this," Adler said, an edge of hysteria in his voice. "Never talk about this."

"Adler," I said, "how did —"

He stilled my question with his wild, round eyes and would say nothing more to me. But as I knelt and spoke the last rites, I heard fragments of his conversation with Lis.

"... do you realize how much damage you could have done?" she asked, clearly troubled. "... you could have broken the connection. It's tenuous enough this far back. ..."

Her voice trailed off as she spoke those words; perhaps she thought better of what she was about to say.

I went on reciting the empty phrases. As I did, I saw in my mind the tube Adler had used. I am a provincial cleric, innocent of the military arts. Still, I am certain that no such weapon exists in the arsenal of any army in the world, and never has.

June 10, 1854

WE CAMPED beside a stagnant pond in the afternoon, choosing not to risk a site without water for the sake of another hour's progress.

Adler fumed. "Stop now?" he said. "It's barely three o'clock."

"Closer to five, I think. Look at the shadows."

Adler regarded me without comprehension.

"Have you never learned to tell the time from the sun?" I asked.

He shook his head, still mystified. "Well, maybe it's five *here*. ..."

Where else would we be but here? I shrugged and set off with Lis on our daily foraging expedition. Our stopping place was bare of fuel, and we followed the marshy stream that fed the lamentable pond. It took us around a promontory and then into an unexpectedly lush valley. Pines and thick undergrowth surrounded a small lake — an explosion of greenness after so many weeks of desolation. Lis ran ahead to the margin of the lake with a cry of delight. In one motion she pulled her tunic over

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her head and dove into the water.

More slowly, transfixed by the sight of her body, I unbuttoned my lama's robe and stepped through the reeds until, by degrees, I was submerged in intoxicating coolness. I kept a short distance from her, unwilling to intrude.

Later, when I lay breathless on the bank, she drew herself from the water, the sun turning the droplets that clung to her to jewels. I tried to avert my gaze, failed.

She knelt beside me in the reeds and returned my look. "Help me," she said.

"How?"

"After he goes to sleep tonight — you and I can take our camels and ride southwest. Leave him behind."

I felt as if I were descending into an abyss. Leave with her? To the southwest? Toward the bamboo forests?

"But you said he can always find you. I never understood —"

She put her hand to my lips. "An instrument. He has an instrument. I'll take it with us."

I nodded slowly. "A silvery box? No larger than a book?"

"Yes."

"This thing, it can detect your presence at so great a distance?" I reached out and seized her bare arms. "Who *are* you? Who is *he*?"

She looked back into my eyes. Tears ran fiercely down her face. She offered no resisance.

"Will you help me?" she asked again.

I released her. I was lost, helpless. "What do you wish?"

"After we've gone to bed, get the camels ready, pack everything. Wait by our tent. I'll take the instrument and meet you."

"He will not awake?"

She looked away. "I'll see to it that he sleeps soundly." She touched the stubble on my shaven head softly. The warmth of her hand flooded me. "I won't go back with him."

I listened for the sound of my calling, for even its spoor, its echo. I heard nothing. I only felt her nearness, smelled the wetness of her skin.

"God forgive me," I whispered. "I will do as you ask."

She stepped back and slid on her tunic. It clung to the moist convexities of her body.

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I stood up, and as I did, a tiger slipped out of the trees to drink at the far side of the lake. After a moment I saw muscles tense beneath its shining fur — it must have scented us — and its massive head swung around. It met my eyes with a steady, ancient gaze, nodded once, then padded back into the trees. I felt blessed, shriven by its passage.

"Two hours after sunset," Lis said. "No more."

I collected the fuel and water we required without meeting her eyes. Nor could I look at Adler on our return; I felt my face and my manner must surely give me away.

No matter. He was preoccupied. He shot a pair of pheasants; the reports echoed a thousand times from the empty hills. We ate in silence, and afterward I took Sambhodha aside and told him of my plans. Hiding his feelings was not in his nature — he made no secret of the betrayal he felt, the loyalty I had rewarded with indifference, his distaste for Adler.

"Take him where he wishes to go," I said. "See that no harm comes to him."

Instead of asking my why — I would have had no answer — he watched Lis enter the tent with Adler, and smiled with his eyes and his missing teeth. Perhaps he understood better than I. I made my evening devotions while Sambhodha hurried off on his short legs, so bowed from his years in the saddle, to pack my possessions. I prayed for forgiveness.

Sambhodha and I rolled up our tent. Perhaps an hour had passed since sunset. I had no way to measure the second hour. I paced in a circle around the fire: sixty slow steps, each one a second. Sixty circles, each one a minute.

I crept to the flap of Adler's *ghurr*. A small oil lamp threw flickering shadows. I watched Adler, his breathing coming in hard gasps, lift Lis's tunic. I stumbled back and curled in the dust, my hands pressed to my ears until I could no longer hear their sounds.

Another half hour passed. Lis slipped from the tent, wearing a dark cloak. The silvery instrument in her hand caught a glint of moonlight. I stood up and stepped forward. She clung to me, her cheek burning where it touched mine.

I led her to where Sambhodha waited with our camels.

"He's staying behind?" she asked.

Her question took me aback. "Of course. Adler would perish without guidance."

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Lis started to speak again, stopped, nodded.

Sambhodha and I said our farewells. We stood foolishly for a long while, then we embraced. I admonished him to find a better example than mine.

Lis knelt the camels. I mounted mine with a sense that the man I had been no longer existed. I fell in behind as her beast followed a barely discernible path into the moonlit hills.

June 12, 1854

THE TRAIL that leads us was surely made by deer or wolves. The only traces of man we see are the *obo*, piles of stones hung with bones and tattered cloth the color of dust.

After a day and a night, I feel certain that we have seen the last of Adler. Our path has often taken us over rocks or over blowing dust that covers our tracks in a moment. We stop for only a few minutes at a time to water our camels or to boil some noodles for ourselves.

Lis has been quiet, introspective. At times she watches me contemplatively; then she turns away when our eyes meet. I am unable to draw her out.

At a grove of alders and wild cherries, she took out Adler's instrument and turned it until it pointed to the west.

"What does it tell you?" I asked.

"We're very close. One more ridge, maybe two."

"Close to what? Must I trust this device with my life without understanding its purpose?"

"I'll show you tomorrow." She kissed me lightly on the cheek. "I promise."

She stared out at the distant hills with her arms angled, her hands resting on her hips. A curious posture, part of the strangeness she shares with Adler. I thought, perhaps this strangeness in her is what I love, what compels me to follow her.

June 13, 1854

THIS MORNING we looked down on a broad valley from a steep, rocky pass. At the center of the valley, a brown thread of river wound past meadows and hummocks and downs. Small streams fed the river from the hills, each a narrow green serpent. At the

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widest point in the valley lay the ruins of a walled city, its massive square buildings worn to mounds by the rare rains. The city was surrounded by ancient fields whose boundaries were still discernible.

"Is that the place you seek?" I asked, pointing to the time-melted city.

Lis frowned, checked her instrument. "Near there, I think." The descent took half the day. We camped where a clear stream met the silty river at the foot of the city walls. We let our camels drink their fill and eat the wild progeny of flax and millet sown in another age.

We hardly spoke as we set up our *ghurr*. The day's warmth clung to the valley, and we both rolled up the hems of our clothes. Lis's limbs shone like fire in the dwindling light. She stared into my eyes as we ate. I shivered and spilled my bitter tea.

When the sun had set, our fire seemed the only light in the world. Lis closed the tent flap against the valley's droning insects. She unbuckled my cloak and slid it from my shoulders. She stood back, and I heard the rustle of cotton and saw tiny sparks from its passage against her skin.

She hesitated for a long moment, then pressed herself against me. Her warmth and softness left me unsteady. She guided me down to our carpet of felt and helped me to find her with my hands. My limbs trembled, and I could only think of how awkward I had become as I broke my vows.

At last she lay with her head resting on my shoulder. I kept her body pressed against my side to reassure myself of her reality.

I was a priest no longer.

Abruptly, I had no vocation, no plans, no ambitions. Nor did I feel any regret at their absence. There was only a swelling sense of relief, of renewed possibilities. The corollaries of my office melted away — the arrogance, the detachment. I could begin to feel again.

I held Lis tighter against me. "What happens now?" I asked.

"Nothing for a while. Maybe nothing ever."

I had grown accustomed to her ambiguities, her mysteries. I inquired no further.

"I've compromised you, haven't I?" she said.

I nodded. "No matter."

She said nothing for a long while. I was near sleep.

Finally: "Evariste?"

"Yes?"

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"Have you ever wanted to travel in time?"

"How do you mean?"

"Visit another era. See Christ crucified, witness the storming of the Bastille."

I shook my head. "Traveling in Tatary is enough like visiting another age."

I don't think she heard me. "I wanted to. I dreamed about it, stepping through a door, vanishing to where he — where my husband — could never find me. I wanted to go to the past . . . not so far back that I wouldn't have any connection with the culture, the language. But a hundred years back, or two hundred."

I was having trouble concentrating. Why did she sound so intense, so solemn?

"But it's dangerous, you know? One disruptive act could change everything. Something you did could break your connection with the future, send your world along a different track. One disruptive act, and you might never have been born. What would happen then?"

She seemed to be talking to herself. I failed to summon the energy required to follow her. After another few minutes, I drifted into an unquiet sleep.

June 14, 1854

THE ABSENCE OF Lis's warmth woke me. I called to her and received no reply. I wrapped myself in my cloak and stepped out of the *ghurr*.

Lis was a lonely, cloaked figure, edged in moonlight against the mute, dissolving city. The silvery instrument lay on the ground a few feet from where she stood. As I watched, a blue radiance spread outward from the device in a half-sphere until it was higher than my head. I moved closer reluctantly, trembling. The glow was too reminiscent of Adler's hollow tube.

An image began to resolve itself within the hemisphere — velvet black space filled with hard white starpoints and a bright ball seething near its center. After a confused moment, I realized I was looking at an image of the Sun. I searched until I found the crescent of Mercury at its limb. The

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orbits of the other planets swung beyond the limits of the scene.

The radiance dissolved into chaos; then, a moment later, I stood at the Moon's orbit, watching the rise of the white-streaked blue Earth.

Lis still seemed unaware of my presence.

My trepidation gave way to curiosity. "What am I seeing?" I asked softly.

"Ringing," Lis answered, not turning to look at me. "Oscillations around the point in space-time I departed from." She wrapped her arms around herself. "You don't know what I'm talking about, do you? I don't either, really."

Another image formed in the hemisphere, this time an oblique view of a mountain range. Suddenly the image was black.

"Inside the Earth now. No light."

The scene changed to dimly lit waves stirred to a froth by a wind that was almost palpable.

"It's converging," she said flatly. "I keep thinking I'm safe. But this thing —" She pointed at the instrument. "It must have some way of measuring space-time displacement. I'm here two hundred years early. My old space-time clings to me. It knows where I am to within a few kilometers."

Her words struck me like blows. *Two hundred years early?*

The next scene was of a city — a low angle looking across a bleak hillside to a forest of angular buildings. Then black again. Then vertigo —a view down the vertical wall of an impossibly tall building to a street crammed with shiny vehicles.

Two hundred years early?

Then a cross section of an interior subdivided by thin partitions like a human hive, glaring white with gray furniture.

I was seeing the future; I had no doubt. Every scene had the hard, bitter feel of reality. I was seeing the time and the place where Lis had lived, the time and place she had escaped from.

Two more views flashed by too quickly to comprehend, and then I saw a small, plain room filled with massive equipment. Letters of fire on Adler's device spelled out something both simple and incomprehensible: SERVO LOCK. The image took on a deeper sense of reality, a solidness. I felt I could walk from the sandy soil of Tatary directly into that terrible room.

Lis put her hands to her face. I heard her crying.

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"What is it?" I asked.

"It's still there."

"What is?"

"The connection — the link back to my time. It should have been broken by our. . . ." She looked up at me. "We're taught never to do that, to disrupt the connection. There's no telling what can happen. I could create a future where I never existed." She paused, took a breath. "But I'm not going back. I don't care what happens." She pointed to the room. "It's all like that. Machines, concrete, disinfectant."

I shook my head. It was too much to grasp. "The link, as you say, why the concern? I thought Adler required this device to find you."

"If he doesn't return — he can't without the instrument, the binder —they'll send men to find him, to find me. They're his people. They'll never stop looking for him."

She began to tremble. I went to her and wrapped her in my cloak. "Why here?" I asked.

She let her head rest on my shoulder. "Space-time is a tangle in whatever dimension the binder operates in. This point in space-time is connected with my departure point — or close enough that the binder can draw the threads together. I don't know any more than that."

That was enough. I sifted the past month's events for inconsistency and found none. Her threads even made Adler's behavior rational. Had we reached the Yellow River, he and Lis would, no doubt, have vanished as inexplicably as they had arrived.

"What would . . . unbind those threads?" I asked.

"I told you — a disruptive act. Something about this time my presence affected. Something that couldn't happen unless I was here."

In the immense stillness of the valley, every sound was distinct, remarkable. I heard an insect ascend and circle. I heard Lis's breathing. I heard my heart pushing blood through my veins.

"What happens then?"

"I've seen it. . . . There's just gray fog in the machine where there should be a connection to the past."

I nodded, not really understanding. A gray fog? A disruptive act? What kind? Our intimacy, perhaps? No. That was too small a thing. The conception of new life?

Conception, yes. Surely that.

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I closed my eyes. I finally understood. I had been an instrument for her; the foil for the device she had stolen from her husband. Whatever else she may have felt for me paled beside that.

A wind blew in from the river, stirring the wild flax, rustling the fabric of our tent.

I looked at Lis again, lovely, helpless, already waiting for the dour men from her unimaginable future.

I couldn't despise her.

The wind strengthened until its sound swept away all the other sounds, until it tore at our clothes. It moved like a voice through the valley, like the sound of solitary horsemen and empty hills and eagles with sun-gilt wings. This time it had the calmness and depth of certainty. This time, I knew, it grew out of love instead of hate.

I released her. I felt weightless, as if one step might lift me from the planet. I faced the glowing hemisphere, moved toward it until I stood at its boundary. I heard a faint hum. The hair on my arms and chest stirred at its proximity.

"Evariste!" Lis shouted.

I held my arms rigidly at my sides. I stepped forward.

A disruptive act.

Something pushed back at me, as if I were moving through a strong wind. Then I took another step, and I was inside that bare white room.

I turned quickly, shielding my eyes from the lights. I saw Lis through a dark haze, her face filled with surprise. She held one hand out toward me. The haze swirled and thickened until it turned a dense, uniform gray. Empty.

Disconnected.

March 13, 2071

I LIVE IN a city that seems to cover the Earth.

My access to information here is limited, but my persistence compensates.

Its streets lie in perpetual shadow; its gray square buildings stand up in rows like broken teeth, like tombstones.

I spend some of each day tracing Lis through the city's records. I located several people who knew her (she was a doctoral student in

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Mongolian history). I even obtained a small, poor photograph of her.

I live with men who stare at the ground as they walk, never exchanging glances or greetings, who speak a language I can barely understand.

Lis left impressions as recently as the week before I arrived — applying unsuccessfully for an emigration permit. Then, nothing.

I live in a place without hope or light, without faith or reason or mercy.

Less explicably, I can find no record of Adler. At the time of her disappearance, Lis was unmarried, nor had she ever been.

There is much work for me here.

"You contact the Johnny Carson show and I'll contact the Letterman people."

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In these days of kiss-and-tell autobiographies, steamy exposes and totally realistic video programs, "real stories" are easy to come by. But often, these real stories are trumped up fabrications, designed to make the author or the subject look good. The truth gets hidden behind a pile of half-fabricated fact. In "The Real Story, by Jenny O'Toole," Barbara Owens examines just such an occurrence.

The Real Story, by Jenny O'Toole

By Barbara Owens

SOMEDAY SOMEONE WILL want to write about this. If I live that long, I'll be famous — see, it was me who discovered him. Don't know about me, do you? Well, nobody does, but there's a reason for that. It'll all come out one day, so I aim to get it all down on this tape while I still remember just how it happened. That way, when the time comes, I'll be ready.

My name is Jenny O'Toole. Jennifer O'Hara O'Toole, to be exact, and it's nobody's business how old I am. I was shipped over from Ireland when I was barely fifteen to marry that no-good O'Toole. Three babies I gave him before I was twenty, then the bum run off and left me to raise them on my own. What could I do, an ignorant young girl fresh off the boat? Scrub and scour, that's what — for thirty years, most lately with the Starlite Office

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Brigade, Inc. Thirty years, while I raised that bum's babies and managed to send them all through college. Oho, off they go into the world, the little darlings, and did I ever hear from them? A letter, a dollar or two for old Mum sometimes? Bums, just like their father, only better educated. Go figure it.

Anyway, the story. Picture it, now. I was living in a dinky little apartment, slaving away for SOB, Inc. It was a bit after midnight, and I was heading home. One of those New York winter nights — snowy, icy, wind going like a banshee. Streets empty. I was so beat I was ready to splurge on a cab, but where are they on nights like that? You know what I mean — a real bitch of a night.

So I was toddling along, half-froze, spitting sleet out of my teeth, when I passed this spooky little alley and caught light from the corner of my eye. About halfway down, there was a glow behind a dumpster. Good big glow. My first thought was something's on fire. Nobody around, but I'm no fool, so I started on by, when I spotted some kind of shadow moving in the glow. Whether I liked it or not, it came to me that somebody might need help.

All right, so I *am* a fool. Off I went, and the closer I got, the better I could see that the glow was a ball of light, bigger than me. No fire, just wavy yellow light. It kept changing size, shooting up like fingers, then falling back tight behind the dumpster. It wasn't making a blessed sound. Well, being nosy by nature, I marched right around the corner of the dumpster, and there it was. Something *was* moving inside it — looked like one of those stick figures the little ones draw when they're just starting out.

Wouldn't *your* jaw drop? For a few seconds, I couldn't move. Then, when the figure said to me, "Hello. Please don't be afraid," I sat down in the snow for a bit to think things over. Sure, I'd already had a drop or two —everyone who works for SOB, Inc. hauls a bottle. But a good hard pinch convinced me I was as sober as I'm likely to be in this life, and that the thing inside the light had spoken to me.

Then it leaned toward me, and all the wavy light leaned with it. I got toasty warm — the thing was better than a stove.

"Are you a citizen of Earth?" it said. "Can you help me? I want to defect."

As I remember, I asked it politely not to hurt me. "I wouldn't hurt anything," it said. "I only need help to become a citizen of this Earth."

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About this time my breath and brains came back from wherever they'd gone visiting. "Who the hell are you?" I asked.

Out of my pocket came that lovely liquid from the old sod. And down the hatch. I didn't get up. It was kind of nice sitting flat in the alley with my tired old legs stretched out.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know," the figure said. "But not here. Will you take me to your home? After you hear my story, I'll leave if you don't want to help."

I know it sounds crazy, but away we went, me and this ball of light with the stick thing inside. And those few souls we came across didn't give us a second look. Good old New York.

I wasn't sure about that hot light — thought maybe the stick might start a fire. My place was a dump, but the only dump I had. But the stick said not to worry; it wouldn't harm a thing. Inside, I got a better look at it. No sign of a head, eyes, mouth — nothing. Just a broom handle with spindly arms and legs.

By now I was busting with curiosity. I planted myself in my favorite chair and stared at it, glowing in the middle of the room.

"What do you want to know?" It had a smooth, warm voice, a man's voice.

"Well, all of it, dear," I said. "My brain's so curdled I don't know what to ask."

The telling took awhile, but the most important part was that this stick was an honest-to-God creature from out there in space.

"I have no true form," it said, and me, I just nodded like I understood. "I'm composed of pure thought. My species comes from nowhere. We need no place to live, no sustenance; we have no purpose — we just are. It's not a bad life, no fears or responsibilities. No one knows we're here, so we just shoot around doing our thing, absorbing the universe."

I think I said something like, "Well, well."

"The trouble is, sometimes I get bored just zooming around all the time," the stick said. "When I came across this place, I decided to hang around awhile. I absorbed some of your movies and television shows and got interested, especially in the portrayals of space creatures, you understand. They're awful, real amateur stuff. I've been everywhere in the universe, and I know. Nothing is as pretty as those things they show you on the screen. That's when I got my idea."

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It was almost morning. The liquid in my bottle was gone; my head felt like peanut butter. I blinked at the stick. "Idea?"

It leaned toward me. "I want to be in your movies. Show creatures as they really are, so terrible that people will faint in their seats. I can be a superstar."

For a minute it was so quiet I heard my stomach slosh. "How you going to do that?"

"Look at me." Sweet Jesus, as if I'd been doing anything else. "Pure mental energy. Look what I've already accomplished. O.K., so the form still needs work, but I'm the first of my species to attempt tangible form. I can do it, Jenny. All I need is a place to practice and someone to get me started in my career. Will you help?"

"I must be crazy," I heard myself whisper. "Years of sniffing Lysol have done me in. I'm actually thinking about what you just said."

The stick's glow brightened. "You people here talk about mind over matter — well, here it is in your living room. What do you say?"

That was right about the time I passed out. Slept like the dead in my old chair. Woke up stiff and cramped to see daylight, and nothing was in the room but me. For just a tick, I felt like bawling. Somehow I'd figured out how to go about it while I was asleep; now there I was, hung over and sad over nothing but a whiskey dream.

Then there was a soft "phht," and the stick was there in its ball of light. The little monkey had been practicing; not only was it thicker, but it had fingers on its hands, and a little round head with pinpoint eyes. I couldn't help myself — I sent out a glad smile.

"How come you want to do this?" I asked for starters.

It had even learned to blink its little eyes. "For fun. Listen, Jenny, how's this for a plan? We'll keep my true identity a secret. I've absorbed enough of your culture to know you're suckers for a mystery. I'll never show myself except in a creature form. Won't even have a name — just 'The Creature.' Don't you love it?"

It slipped out before I could stop it. "Well, Sid would have to know."

The stick's light swooped so close I started to sweat from the heat. "Who's Sid?"

"This agent in one of the buildings I clean. Sid Herman. Been around a good while, Sid has. We share a sip now and again when he's working late. Good guy — we can trust him. Never had much luck. He'd do anything to

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manage a really big star."

"You're going to help me!" The ball of light shot up so bright I had to cover my eyes. When I looked again, the stick had elbows and knees —and a poochy little mouth that grinned. "Jenny, you won't be sorry. I'll make a fortune, and I don't need money. Every penny of it will be yours."

My eyes crossed. I knew right then it would happen. In spite of O'Toole and his rotten children, I was going to end up loaded.

One thing about me: once I make up my mind, I never back down. I brewed an evil pot of tea and sat down at the kitchen table to make plans. The stick was glowing in the corner by the picture of my sainted mother. Looked like it was working on a neck and shoulders.

"I don't suppose you've got a name," I said.

"Never needed one."

I could see the shoulders growing, and I was cold sober, too. "You need one now. You know if you're a boy or a girl?"

That seemed to amuse it. "Thought is without gender. My species has no concern for such things."

"Well, you're on Earth now, deary. Things are different here. You've got a nice man's voice. I'm going to call you Sammy, after my darling little brother who choked on some mutton when he was nine. If he'd lived, he'd probably be a bum, but Sammy was my sweetheart, and that's your name."

"O.K." Feet were branching from the bottom of skinny little legs.

"And stop wasting energy on that shape. When we see Sid, we've got to have something to show him. Practice being a man in your spare time, but now we need creatures. I expect it'll take several to convince Sid."

Sammy shook his round little head. "It'll scare you, Jenny. Some of them are really bad."

The thought of all that money had made me a little dizzy. "I won't be scared; I'll know it's you. Practice, practice!"

In the beginning, Sammy practiced nights while I was out slaving for SOB, Inc. Daytimes, while I slept, he went out to absorb more movie creatures, but that got him so fired up with disgust after a while that he started coming home and practicing while I was asleep. The first time I woke up and caught him at it, I wouldn't stop screaming or come out of the bathroom until he changed back. I'd never stopped to realize how some of his creatures might look. Sammy was sorry, but I said it would be all right if he just warned me before he showed up like that again.

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I lied. I needed plenty of Irish smooth at first before I could sit down and play audience, and I needed more to put myself to sleep after. I took to carrying a bottle with me, and I was so shaky I wouldn't squash a cockroach without stopping to ask it, "Sammy darlin', is that you?"

After a while, though, I could look at scales, tentacles, and great drooly jaws without turning a hair. Once or twice I got so involved I made suggestions — fangs could be a tad sharper, love, and how about more ooze and slime hanging down from there. That was a mistake. Sammy went into a huff, and said he guessed he knew his subject matter better than I did, so I learned real quick to let well enough alone.

In just a few weeks, he could whip from one disgusting thing to another before I could down a shot. It was time to talk to Sid Herman. I marched into his office one dark night with a bottle and two glasses.

"I like you, Sid," I said straight out. "You deserve a crack at something big. Let's talk." I got myself comfortable in one of his saggy chairs.

Sid grinned. "You going into show business, Jenny?"

I threw my drink down; Sid sipped his. Only thing wrong with Sid —he's not a true drinking man.

"Not me, Sid, though I can sing like a bird if the spirits move me. I'm talking real talent, something that'll make us both rich if we can pull it off. Trust me; you've never come across anything like this before. Do me a favor — see the boy before you say no. I guarantee your socks will fall down."

Sid hit me with his droopy eyes. Tall and bony, he puts me in mind of a lonesome old hound — long face, big ears, little white fuzz of hair. I knew he'd heard all this before, but in show business, there's always the hope that the next one will be IT.

"What's he do?" Sid asked finally.

Had him. I leaned back and crossed my legs. "Acting. Specialty acting, you might say. Wants to do space films and do them right. Authentic creatures, that kind of thing."

A look of pain crossed his face, but I barreled on before he could throw me out.

"I know what you're going to say about camera tricks and makeup, but this is different, Sid. I can't explain it — you got to see it for yourself. I figure you're too smart to say no before you do."

He grew a little smile. "Good pitch, Jenny."

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"You can thank me after," I grinned back.

"All right, what's his name?"

"Right now, just The Creature. Plenty of time for details later. When, Sid?"

He groaned. "The Creature?"

"When, Sid?"

He did a lot of sighing, especially when I told him we'd have to audition at night, but we set the deal, and I was gone like a flash before he had time to change his mind.

FOR THE next two days, Sammy never stopped practicing, flashing back and forth between creatures so fast I started walking slow, never knowing what was around the next corner. On the big day, we were both jumpy. I called in sick to SOB, Inc. Sammy prowled the apartment, going through shapes like lightning, leaving trails of icky stuff all over my floor. I managed to stay sober by thinking of dollar signs singing and dancing all the way into my bank.

At midnight, Sammy went through his repertoire one last time, and I felt real sympathy for poor, unsuspecting Sid. When a long, snaky head leaned down from the ceiling, and a red-and-yellow eye as big as my head floated in my face, I just swallowed hard and hung on to my bottle.

"I need a bigger place to practice, Jenny. Some of my best creatures are missing because I'm cramped in here."

"Patience, deary," I said. "Once we get going, you'll have all the space you need. Right now you're doing fine."

So off we went into the night — Sammy in his invisible thought form, me toting two fifths of Irish smooth. Drinking man or not, Sid was going to need it.

Sammy waited outside Sid's office while I went in. I set the bottles on his desk, poured two shots, and wrapped his hand around one.

"What's this for?" Sid wanted to know.

"Just sit tight," I advised him, pulling my chair close to his. "I'll be right here if you need me. Comfy? All right, Sammy, sweetheart, come on in."

Well, Sammy came through the door as one of my favorites, a big black slimy thing with no definite shape. It filled half of Sid's office, and it kept growing, changing, dripping awful stuff and sprouting things all over. It had a nice sound, too — heavy, scratchy breathing that got under your

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skin until you couldn't stand it. A good opener, real attention-getter, one of Sammy's best.

I slipped a look at Sid, and he was sitting like a stone. I tried to hoist his shot for him, but his arm was frozen — I couldn't budge it. Didn't want his heart to stop, so I gave Sammy the nod, and he started oozing back out the door. Just before the last pieces of him went through, big jaws opened, and an awful, panting voice said, "Hello, Sid. Pleased to meet you, I'm sure."

That darling boy. What a brilliant touch. One last appendage, and he was gone.

He kept it up for a half hour, and not once did Sid Herman move. Finally I signaled Sammy to end it. He made a scaly, writhing exit, but he'd saved a surprise.

The door opened again, and something came through that I can't even describe. You all saw it if you caught *When Nightmares Come True*. Did you faint? I did, for a minute, and when I came to, Sammy stickman was grinning at me from the door.

"Gotcha, Jenny! I've been working on that one in secret."

"Bless you, darlin'; that's a good one. Wait outside, now, till I get Sid moving again."

It took awhile, but gradually I got him loosened up enough to start drinking. He downed three shots before he blinked, and two more before he could turn his eyes to look at me.

He sounded very calm. "Jenny, what is that you've got there?"

So I told him all of it, and how we couldn't pull it off without him. I kept filling his glass, and finally he was to the point where I could bring Sammy back in his ball of light for an introduction.

A few more shots, and the two were the best of friends. We took Sid back to my place to sleep it off, and he woke up the next morning already making plans. We sat around all day drinking tea. Even then we knew we were on our way.

"Gotta be that nobody ever sees him as himself," Sid directed. "Not a whiff of where he lives or anything. That's where you come in, Jenny. You're his cover, but no one will know about you. I'll be the only way to get to him."

"Sounds fine," I agreed. "That way, O'Toole and his worthless children can't get wind of it and try to cut in."

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Sid gave Sammy a worried look. "How do we move him around without being seen?"

Sammy grinned. "Remember?" He went "phht" and was gone.

Sid was shaking his head when he left. "This is crazy, Jenny; you know that."

"Right," I came back. "Just do like I do. Stop trying to figure it out."

While Sid got things rolling, Sammy went back to practicing so hard that I was actually glad to get away to SOB, Inc. Sid and me huddled every night after the building was dark. He didn't have an easy job — selling an actor that no one could see. He was counting on tapes of Sammy to do it.

"Those guys love a gimmick," he told us. "If Sammy's good enough, they'll buy it."

So we rented a warehouse and spent one whole night taping Sammy's repertoire. And just a few days later, Sid grabbed me one night in the hallway. "I'm flying out to the Coast tomorrow. We've got three big bites."

When I went yodeling home to tell Sammy, he said, "Didn't I tell you?" and went right on practicing, cool as you please.

Three more days, and it was in the bag. Sammy's tape knocked them out. The California boys already had a project, Sid called to say, and the financing was solid. The Coast boys were crazy about the mystery angle. "This is going to be big, Jenny, really big."

But there were a few problems. Since Sammy didn't really exist, we had to furnish proof that he did. And he had to be certified physically fit before they could swing insurance for the deal.

"Mother of God," I said, "does this mean a physical exam?"

"Not to worry," Sid said. "I think I can handle it."

And he did. He was counting on California wanting Sammy so bad they wouldn't ask a lot of questions, and he was right. I never knew exactly how he pulled it off, but we ended up with all the right documents showing Sammy was real and healthy as could be. No one would ever know he had nothing inside him but a nice warm glow.

Sid and Sammy went off to California. Sid called every day, and things were working like a charm. Nobody ever saw Sammy — he reported for work in thought form, went "Phht" and showed up in character, and went "phht" again in his dressing room, and that's how easy it was. Everything was working out just like Sammy said it would.

Even bigger. You weren't on this planet if you didn't see, hear, or read

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about Sammy's debut in *The Creature on Campus*, Hollywood's biggest money-maker ever. The public went wild over The Creature. They held contests over who'd been to see the movie the most times. Some kid in Michigan won; he'd followed it all over the country, racking up more than three hundred times, and he vowed to devote his life to seeing all The Creature's films as often as he could.

Before *The Creature on Campus* was out a week, deals were under way for Sammy's next five films. And, Lordy, did the money start to roll in.

Sammy got lonesome for me. He wanted me in California, and he didn't have to ask me twice. He wanted Sid, too, but Sid dug in his heels. He was New York born and bred, he said, didn't want too much of that rich California life. Me, I kissed SOB, Inc. good-bye and took off for surfland without a backward look.

There was a cab waiting for me at the L.A. airport, and when it deposited me at a certain address, Lord love us, you never saw such a house. Hiding in the hills with enough land for a full-sized park around it. Sammy was inside glowing, and he told me it was mine. He'd had Sid buy it for me — do you believe it? Three stories, six-car garage, enough sunshine and fresh air to make me sick before I got used to it, and all because I'd been a friend to Sammy when he needed one.

Well, I blubbered like a ninny. I thought of that bum O'Toole, and swore I'd take care of Sammy till the day I died. Sammy said I didn't have to lift a finger unless I wanted to — he'd hired people to take care of everything. That's when it finally hit me that we'd arrived — Jenny O'Toole had her own cleaning brigade. I kicked off my shoes, settled back with a bottle of Irish smooth, and went about learning how the other half lived.

It took Sid awhile longer, but after a few more trips, he caved in. Wouldn't live in fancy digs, though — took a little apartment in the Valley. But he started dressing spiffy, and Sammy had me buy him a car. Sid had never owned a car. If you want to see something funny, try catching Sid on the freeway, folded into a little yellow thing about the size of a bumper car, doggy face hanging out with a grin.

You already know how Sammy's career took off. Every picture bigger than the last. We had a big horse barn out back big enough to practice in, so his creatures got bigger and scarier, and the fans couldn't get enough. You know how some stars spill their guts in public every chance they get?

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Well, the public was wild for Sammy, and half of it was because everything about him was such a secret. They loved it!

It went on that way for about two years, then one day I was coming out of the market loaded with goodies. I was turning into a real California girl — scarfed up quiche, knocked back a dainty glass of white wine now and then with my Irish smooth, and could almost eat guacamole without throwing up. So I was humming, packing bags into my Beemer, when this voice said over my shoulder, "Can I help you with your groceries, ma'am?"

Well, this guy standing beside me almost stopped my heart. I was used to pretty young men in California, but this one — teeth, hair, shoulders, eyes — those eyes could kill you, and you'd go gladly. He finished stowing my bags for me while I stood there like a chunk.

I think I finally managed an, "Uh, thank you."

He leaned close. "How about giving me a ride home?"

The voice, the smell of him, Lordy. *Anywhere. Anywhere, darlin', with you.* Then I got hold of myself. "Well, I don't know. Whereabouts do you live?"

I was fixated on his teeth. Swear to God, they gleamed. No plaque or cavity would have the guts to grow there.

"We could go to your place," he said.

That finally set off a siren in my head. I puffed up to full height and stared him right in the chest. "Listen, you," I said. "Back off before I call a cop! What kind of nice old lady do you think I am?"

When he started to laugh, I got really mad — drew back to belt him with my purse, when he caught hold of my wrist. "Jenny, it's Sammy. Hey, don't hit me! Honest, I'm Sammy."

I started sucking air like a fish. "Sammy?"

His smile was blinding me. "I had to try it out on you first. You'd be the one to know if it wasn't any good."

"But how — when — what —?"

"Let's go home. I'll tell you about it. Jenny, you should have seen your face."

"Ho ho," I said, feeling like some kind of fool. "That was a lovely joke, sweetheart. Get in. We need a nice long talk."

Turns out Sammy was bored with doing creatures. It wasn't fun anymore, scaring people all the time.

"I've been out absorbing, Jenny. Hunks, that's who the really big stars

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are. Why can't I be one? I've been at it only a few weeks, and look what I've done. I even fooled you, right?"

My face got hot, remembering me drooling back in the parking lot. "You better talk to Sid."

Well, Sid's no fool; of course he went for it. And it was even easier the second time around. The California boys already loved Sid — they'd jump at any hot new talent he offered. Sid did his magic with getting the proper documents; this time, Sammy had a real name, and he was a star all over again. To tell the truth, eventually he was several stars. Girls had so many new hunks to lust over that it drove them crazy trying to settle on one. I can't give away all the names he went under, but here's a hint — sometimes he used "Sam" somewhere, like Samuels, Samuelson, Sam Smith, and so on. And sometimes he didn't, so that slows you down, doesn't it?

We all laughed about it — Sid's list of hot clients got longer and longer, and every one of them was Sammy. He could do anything. Even played two parts in a picture once — just fixed it so he wasn't with himself in the same scene. And once, for a joke, he played a man and a woman in the same film. Remember Tiffany Samms in *Long Lost Love*? Got terrific reviews and then dropped out of sight, never made another movie. Now you know why — that was Sammy.

He still did a few creature films, but he liked hunks better. And Sid never allowed publicity about his private life. Naturally, that just made everyone pant harder to find out about these gorgeous guys, you know.

Ah, Sammy, what a darling. He never stopped thinking about Sid and me. "Spend the money," he'd say. "I don't have any use for it. You've earned it. Enjoy."

His trouble is, though, that no matter how good at everything he is, he gets bored easy. Not long ago he started going away nights. That wasn't like him — used to be he'd spend every spare minute practicing in the barn. I figured he had a right to sow a few oats, but, considering his physical peculiarities, I wondered what they were, if you know what I mean.

Well, one night he came in while I was watching one of his film videos, and he hung around in the corner being a nuisance, waiting for me to notice him. Finally I said, "Can I do something for you, love?"

"Come out to the barn with me, Jenny," he said. "I've got a surprise." He

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seemed excited.

I never knew what he'd do next, so I traipsed off after him, muttering a prayer. I didn't know what to expect, but I didn't expect to see people. Five of them when he turned on the lights, and every one as much a hunk as Sammy.

"Jenny, I'd like you to meet some friends of mine," Sammy said. I remember thinking I was glad he'd made some friends — up to then the only humans he had were Sid and me. I smiled, and five gorgeous guys smiled back.

Then, way over in a corner, behind all the rest, I saw this glow. Like a ball of light with a stick figure moving around inside it. Holy Mother, did I let out a yip. "Sammy. Talk to me!"

"They've been hanging around absorbing what I've done here," Sammy said. "They want to do it, too. I've taught them all I can, Jenny. Now they need you and Sid."

To make it short, they're all sweethearts. Even Joey, the stickman, though he's a little slow. Joey tries hard, but he hasn't got past the stick figure yet. But wouldn't you know that old genius Sid got someone to write a TV movie for Joey, about this stick-figure alien who comes to Earth in a ball of light. It was a sweet little story, and it knocked everyone out wondering how they did it. There's talk Joey may be up for an Emmy. Could be the only part he ever gets if he can't come up with a better shape, but Joey won't mind. He's not dedicated like the others. He's happy just to be here, likes to sit around playing cards with me and glowing out by the pool. He's my love, Joey is. They're all my loves — and they give every cent of their money to Sid and me.

Sometimes it's a handful, I tell you, juggling all those careers. Kevin's got a movie coming out next month. Michael and Colin do commercials, and Patrick may get his own series. Brian's the only one not sure what he wants to do.

Sammy says Brian's always been different. He's gotten a little interested in politics, and, of course, if he sets his mind to it, there's not much he can't do. Lord love us, doesn't it make you stop and think? A politician who's all pure, strong thought and doesn't give a whit about getting anything for himself. Almost makes you want to cry from wanting, doesn't it?

As for Sammy, my darlin', he's still doing hunks, but lately he's started

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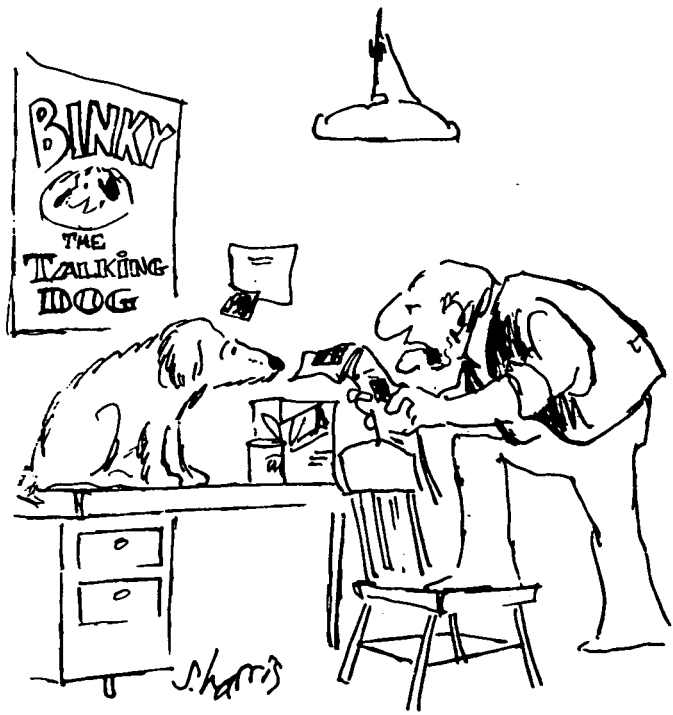
talking about character parts. Where will it all end, you ask? My dears, I have no idea.

And that's about all my story up to now. I'm sure there'll be more if the time comes to let it out. Then again, it might never get out. Those boys may just get bored and go zooming back into space to absorb some more.

Sometimes I think about you out there, you know — how you'll take it if you ever find out. Even after you know which stars they are, you'll still be wondering if there are any more around. Who's who — or what? You'll never really know for sure, will you?

Well, I bet I'll know. Remember the name — Jennifer O'Hara O'Toole. Come see me — we'll do lunch. I'll bring the Irish smooth.



"Oh, oh — Looks like you got a pretty bad review from that poodle who writes for the Globe."

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Joyce Thompson is best known for her mainstream novels and short stories, although a few have appeared in the science fiction genre. Her latest novel, Bones, *has been marketed as a mystery by Avon. She is part of a group of Seattle writers that includes Nebula winner Elizabeth Anne Scarborough. In fact, it was as admittance to a party held by Annie that Joyce wrote this story. "Synecdoche" is much more than an admission ticket — it is a strong, spooky story that would be best read aloud beside a roaring hearth fire on Halloween.*

Synecdoche

By Joyce Thompson

IN SIX HOURS, it will be Halloween. There is no time for artful beginnings, if I'm to get the story told. The rules of exposition will have to be suspended. I will simply have to tell you things — it would take a whole damn novel to *show* you, and I haven't got that kind of time. There's only five hours and forty-seven minutes left as it is. If you're to get anything from the story at all, you will simply have to choose to believe me. Believe me when I say things like, Donal once said I was the only woman he could ever be true friends with, because my deformity was as great as his own.

I was shocked, believe me, and felt accused. Outwardly, I'm perfect. Not perfect in the sense of beauty; perfect as in normal. I am possessed of all my parts, and they are placed, on the whole, well within the

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limits of the standard deviation, in a reasonably harmonious pattern that gives a certain modest pleasure to the eye. That is to say, I have no obvious physical defects. What Donal found deviant in me had to have something to do with the invisible stuff inside.

Since I was six years old, when my neighbor, then twelve, argued the case convincingly, I have believed I am damned. Millicent was one of those bright, sensitive, somewhat unpopular girls who sublimate the upheaval of puberty into religious zeal. The legal fine points of Roman Catholic canon especially pleased her; she would have made a grand Inquisitor. Lacking a courtoom equal to her inspiration, she instead entrapped me into telling an obvious lie to my baby-sitter, then invited me to prove my innocence by swearing on the Bible that my lie was true — not just invited, but bullied, tempted, and cajoled me into swearing. When I did, she turned on me the mad, ecstatic eyes of a Savonarola, and pronounced my sentence. While telling a lie in and of itself was something God was willing to forgive if properly entreated and placated, swearing on the Bible to something that isn't true was a mortal sin. Not only was this offense punishable by eternity in Hell, God wouldn't like me anymore.

I believed Millicent. Ever since that day, I have carried unworthiness at the heart of me, guilt in my stomach, companions quiet and well behaved by daylight, but most eloquent indeed in the gloom of 3:00 A.M. When Donal referred to my deformity, I took it for granted he could see the dark and pitiful wretch inside me, my secret self, and knew that I was damned.

Donal, of course, was never so obvious. He smiled me that smile that was always at himself, in admiration of his own wit, and then at me, a slight variant, the I-have-the-upper-hand-now smile. "Your need to nurture, Cynthia, is as abnormal as my arm."

Another smile then, the one that has to do with playing trump. "Because we have learned to accept one another's deformities, it is possible for us to be true friends."

That took a long time to tell, more than half an hour. I see that I shall have to be more direct. Donal and I were lovers once. My abnormality led me to believe I could exorcise his demons with my unselfish love. Donal had beautiful demons, uncommonly elegant and original, demons that may have arisen from his arm, but were not of it. The arm in question was perhaps eight inches long and resembled a sausage more than a human

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limb. Three small single-jointed fingers sprouted from its distal end. The arm was affixed without much ceremony to his shoulder, and was, as you might expect, not particularly useful. This defect is relatively common among "thalidomide babies," which Donal was. His mother was never able to reach beyond her own guilt to find her love for her son; his arm reproached her. Donal was never able to reach beyond his disappointment to forgive the defect of her love.

His self-indulgence was a death wish. He was a Don Juan. His prey were women like me, who wanted to mother him. Donal was fascinating company, full of arcane knowledge and eccentric aphorisms. He was a generous colleague and a loyal friend. It was not entirely surprising, given his circumstances and his predilections, that Donal Canty became a writer of psychological horror novels, nor that he was a surpassingly good one. In his fiction, Donal showed an uncanny understanding of the nuances of the human psyche. His books were all the more deliciously horrible for the subtlety of his perceptions. His prose, like his manners, was impeccable.

If this sounds like a eulogy, I suppose that's appropriate. Donal Canty died last Halloween. Some of these things — the kind one, anyway — I would have said at his funeral, if he had had one.

Halloween has always been a special event for the Darklings, the writers' group that Donal started here a dozen years ago for people who write dark fantasy. Every month, November through September, the membership meets, workshop style, to critique one another's work in progress, but October's meeting, always scheduled for All Hallows' Eve, is traditionally a grand frivolity celebrating the autumnal darkness of the landscape, and the soul. The responsibility of hosting the Darklings' Halloween party passed, in annual rotation, among us. If I had four months, instead of the four hours that remain, I would tell you about past Halloweens, so you would understand how much it was a point of honor among us to surprise, to surpass one another when it came our turn to conjure up the evening's entertainment. We have had seances and hauntings, magic shows and witch-hunts, evenings when we were required to don costumes and keep in character while improvising a dark and fiendish plot.

Given our number, it had been seven years since Donal hosted us on Halloween. When the official invitations arrived, early in October, I saw

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that Donal was holding the party, not at his townhouse, but at the mountain cabin he acquired some years ago when his olfactory-obsession novel, *Common Scents*, sold to the movies, and his accountant advised him to invest in real estate. The cabin was a marvel, built in the twenties as one of several residential-scale warm-up exercises by the architect who designed the great log-deco lodges at Paradise and Timberline. Furnishing it, Donal gave free rein to his taste for the outrageous as well as for the opulent. Most of his collection of Latin American Day of the Dead masks, as well as the pornographic velvet paintings he had commissioned over the years, hung, superbly lighted, in the cabin. The beds in all five bedrooms were made up with real down comforters and real black satin sheets. On the ceiling of the master bedroom, Donal had installed a massive mirror.

As I don't have studded tires for my Saab, and the weather report warned of snow in the mountains, I arranged to ride to Donal's with Clifford Bangs and Nevil Dooter in Clifford's Jeep. I had been writing hard since August on a new novel and had scarcely spoken to a soul. The book was provisionally finished on October 29, and I planned to stay on a few days after Halloween to catch up with Donal. Our definition of true friendship was eclectic, including chaste but intimate nights spent in each other's arms when either of us felt in need of creature comfort, even accommodating the occasional flare-up of old desires. Out of bed, we ate well, punned endlessly, and, like children, hid under furniture and behind doors, then leaped out unexpected, for the pure delight of startling one another. As we left the city and headed for the mountains a year ago, I was looking forward to my small vacation.

Driving east, we tried to second-guess our host. Clifford, who peoples his stories with blue-collar zombies, said, "I'm betting decadent. 'Sympathy for the Devil' played on a replica of Huysmans's sense organ. Maybe a tableau vivant of Bosch's Hell."

Nevil belched gently in response. Soon after he published the last volume of his postapocalyptic tetralogy, to no great acclaim, his agent landed him the job of head writer for a paperback series of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle spin-offs, an undertaking that has improved his finances but destroyed his writing. Nevil's prose now reads like Nouveau Tom Mix. "I just hope he doesn't take it out on the food," he said.

We laughed. The last time Donal hosted us on Halloween, it was for a

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feast of "slimy things." The menu included caviar, escargot, rattlesnake, tripe, alligator, squid, beef tongue, and Rocky Mountain oyster. Clifford said, "How about you, Cynthia? Has Donal let anything slip?"

"I haven't asked," I told them. "I'd rather be surprised."

It was already dark when we reached the cabin, the snow already falling. The windows blazed a bright welcome among the tall fir and cedar that encircled Donal's mountain retreat. Donal himself was thinner than when I last saw him, his eyes bright and his smile wolfish. He favors capes, because of his arm; that night he wore black satin brocade, to Byronic effect with his long red Irish hair. When he kissed me hello, he whispered that he couldn't wait for the evening's entertainment to begin. The others — Maime Dowdy, of erotic-vampire fame; Kevin Klutz, who writes the Nazi Hunter books; and Tex DelPina, author of cowboy ghost stories —had arrived before us.

Given the constraints of time, I won't tarry over dinner, as we did then, or savor Donal's sherry, his wines and brandy, but simply tell you we were well fed and mellow by the time Donal led us from the dining to the living room, where a huge fire blazed in the native-stone fireplace, providing both heat and light. Eight chairs were pulled into a semicircle before the fire; behind them the room melted in shadow. When we were seated, Donal stood before us and the fire, his whole right arm plying the cape as he introduced our Halloween diversion.

"About nine months ago," he said, "someting happened to me that every writer both anticipates and dreads. My inspiration withered and dried up. My imagination shrank to the size of a chick-pea. My prose grew heavy and pedestrian. For weeks on end, I could not write so much as one sentence that pleased me. For the first time in a twenty-five-year career, I was blocked, jammed, dammed, stuck in the mud of my own gracelessness.

"There had been bad times before; I knew tricks, and tried them all, to no avail. The spigot was still dry. The harder I tried to recapture my former fluency, the more lifeless and lugubrious my work became. At first I grew frustrated, and then the fight went out of me, and I became depressed, dangerously depressed, until the only plot I wished or tried to hatch was the one that would most ingeniously end my own life. I might have committed suicide, friends, had I been inspired enough to devise an original means of doing so, but even on that subject, alas, my thoughts were disappointingly commonplace.

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"At last, in despair, I sought professional help. Tonight we are privileged to be joined by the gentleman whose help I found." Here Donal turned to the door that opened on his study, and, raising his voice slightly, said, "Doctor, please join us now." The man who emerged from Donal's study was tall but narrow-shouldered, so ordinary in his neat gray suit he might have been Donal's accountant and not his shrink. "This, my Darkling friends, is Dr. Walter Makepiece, a specialist in the treatment of disorders of the creative personality, a man of extraordinary insight, skill, and compassion." Looking somewhat abashed by Donal's introduction, Makepiece entered and sat in the empty chair beside Donal's, while the rest of us acknowledged his presence with social mumbles. From his vest pocket, Donal produced his gold watch and consulted it. "The witching hour draws near," he said.

As it does now, my own clock tells me. I must give off quoting Donal and simply tell you what he said: that Makepiece was a licensed hypnotherapist, adept at past-life regressions, which revelations he put to use in healing the present troubled soul. Tonight, using similar techniques, the doctor was prepared to attempt to contact not our former selves, but that most central and mysterious part of us, our muses. The rest of us could choose to participate, or simply watch. Donal was ready to go first.

This said, he sat upon a simple straight-back chair, facing away from the fire, and the doctor sat beside him, told Donal to get comfortable, to close his eyes, to relax, to breathe deeply. The doctor's voice was deep and soothing, so amiable and intimate I felt myself relaxing even as I saw the stiffness leave Donal's posture, watched him slouch comfortably, his face grown clear and peaceful. His right hand, on his stomach, rose and fell as he took long, rhythmic breaths.

"Now," said the doctor, "I want you to go to the place where your stories come from. It's a dark place, but you don't need to be afraid. You've been there before. Nothing can hurt you. See the door? It's there before you. Now, Donal, I want you to open that door."

Donal's hand rose from his stomach, reached out, spasmed, and fell back limp. "That's right, Donal; that's good. Have you opened the door now, Donal?"

Donal's lips parted and moved silently for a moment before he succeeded in croaking, Yes. Did I believe he was truly in a trance. His behavior seemed authentic; I remembered from being hypnotized myself,

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to stop smoking, how hard language came in that deep place. Still, Donal was a gifted actor. I suspended judgment.

"Good, Donal," the doctor said. "You're doing fine, just fine. Do you need a light, Donal? If you need it, turn on the light."

Donal nodded slightly, a dip of his chin toward his chest.

"What do you see, Donal? Is your muse there?"

Donal's eyes flew open then and stayed wide, although what he saw was not us, not the room we sat in. His face was bloodless in the firelight, the expression on it precisely what I hoped to incite in my readers, but had never before seen on a human countenance: pure terror. He trembled and moaned wordlessly, the way I have known him to in the grip of nightmares.

Instinctively, I followed Donal's gaze to the focal point and, yes, cried out, when I saw what was there. Around me, I heard the others gasp. There, at the far edge of the firelight, stood a young boy, perhaps six or seven years old, a pale, lovely red-haired boy dressed like a wild creature in animal skins, a boy who looked exactly as I had often fondly imagined Donal to look at that age, except that this child, unlike Donal, had two pale, slender, whole and normal arms.

I still believed it was an artful hoax. So Donal's philandering had produced a child, I remember thinking; this is his son. Later the others recalled thinking something along the same lines — this is his way of claiming paternity, the old goat. The firelight danced in the child's eyes, giving them the same excited glitter I had observed in Donal's all evening long. I had time to wonder how the boy's presence would influence the remainder of my visit, whether we would like each other, and just how Donal planned to climax this revelation, before the child sprang into motion, running gracefully toward Donal in his chair. My gaze arrived before the child did, in time to see the blank terror on my old friend's face.

The child's hands closed on Donal's throat with what appeared to be a manic strength. We were slow to react, too slow, still believing that, macabre as what we witnessed was, it was theater, a metaphor, a modern miracle play of Donal's own devising. "Stop," the doctor commanded, but the child did not stop. We believed the doctor was in cahoots, until he turned to us. "Help him. Please. Hurry."

We rose then — excepting Mamie, who fainted — and moved toward them, Clifford in the vanguard. When he gripped the boy's shoulder, the

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child lunged forward and squeezed tighter still. Seconds later there were three, four of us trying to pull the child off the man, but he stuck there, squeezing, squeezing, like an iron leech, and didn't give off until Donal's face went slack, and his swollen tongue slid out between blue lips. One look at the doctor's face told me this part of the play had not been rehearsed. The boy climbed off Donal and crouched beside the fire, regarding us warily as he massaged one hand with the other. The doctor checked meticulously for vital signs, and, finding none, pronounced Donal Canty dead.

Only two hours left before midnight. I must be quick.

For a while we sat in stunned silence. It was Nevil, I think, who said it. "It seems we have a body on our hands."

Clifford said, "Did Donal plan this, Doc? Is there a suicide note or something?"

Pale as a turnip, the doctor shook his head. "This wasn't. . . . I never dreamed. . . ."

"So," Nevil said. "What now?"

"It seems to me," Tex drawled, "that we have two problems. One, what to do with Donal, otherwise known as the body. Two, what to do with the kid."

Mamie, awake now, voted that we call the police immediately and explain what had happened.

"No cop in his right mind is going to swallow that Donal got offed by his own muse." That was Nevil, and I reluctantly concurred. The child, still crouched by the fire, was sucking his sore knuckles. I saw Donal then, small and wounded, and my heart softened. "Maybe I can get close to him," I volunteered. Slowly, I rose and moved as softly as I could toward the little boy, cooing reassurances, smiling with a tenderness that was almost real by the time I stood before him. In slow motion, my hand reached out to touch his hair. As soon as it did, he jerked as if I'd shocked him, then bolted down the dark corridor that led to the nether parts of the house.

"Good job, Cynthia," Nevil said.

Clifford said, "Shut up, Nevil." He turned to the rest of us. "Whatever we do, we do together. Between us, we should be able to invent something pretty convincing."

And so we did. Soon after Halloween, the world believes, Donal Canty

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embarked on a protracted journey. His new novel has just been published. The critics have found it uneven, but full of energy. Because he is so engrossed in his next book, he has declined to make any public appearances on behalf of the one just published. Donal's close associates, the Darklings, spread his news and keep his name alive.

The truth is this. We burned Donal's body in the fireplace that snowy night. It took hours and smelled dreadful, but it had to be done. Collaborating, Clifford, Tex, and I wrote the new book. Mamie and the doctor have been traveling. They write to us, and to his other friends and editors, signing Donal's name. If this were all there was to it, we could probably go on forever.

But I can't.

That night we all stayed at the cabin, hoping the child would reappear so we could deal with him somehow. At last, exhausted, we bedded down, Mamie and I sharing one bed, the men the others, while a pair of us kept watch on the fire. My dreams were shocking, sexual, and full of Donal. My own arousal woke me sometime near dawn, and I understood it, for there beside me in the bed, gently suckling at my breast, was Donal's muse. I was surprised I had milk for him, but so I did. My abnormality. Mamie slept like the dead.

The child was still there, dozing, when Nevil came to wake us the next morning. Nevil seized the boy before he woke, and was going to dispatch him, but something had changed in the night, and I begged him not to. "He likes me," I told the others. "He won't hurt the rest of us. I want to keep him."

At last, because they needed me, and my silence, my compatriots agreed. Since then I have lived in the cabin, lived with a Donal who is able to accept my love, who devours it. In fact, he is insatiable. That is my trouble now. After a year, there is almost nothing of me left. My clothes hang half-empty on my body; I am always exhausted, sleep all night and half the day. Except for Donal's novels, I have written nothing for months and months. My breasts, once miraculously full, are drying up. The child knows this, and is angry.

There are three minutes left until midnight. Thank God, or whatever force has propped me upright at the keyboard this long. If not well told, my story is at an end.

In the living room, the Darklings await their entertainment. The fire burns hot and playful, caressing what it consumes.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

THE BIOLOGICAL CENTURY

The nineteenth century was dominated by the metaphors and technological implications of two sciences: chemistry and mechanics.

To be sure, the audacious Darwin-Wallace theory of evolution by natural selection began preparing the ground for modern biology, and excited enormous public furor. Elsewhere in England, Michael Faraday and James Clerk Maxwell were laying the foundations of electromagnetic technology. But the older crafts and models of Newtonian mechanics and workaday chemistry drove the great economic and social engines.

Yet in the waning years of that century, Edison and others sounded the opening theme of the next era. For clearly, physics has dominated our century.

Electromagnetic theory and experiment gave us the telephone, radio, TV, computers, and made the internal combustion engine practical—thus, the car and airplane, leading inevitably to the rocket and outer space. The fateful wedding of that rocket with the other monumental product of physics, the nuclear bomb, led to the end of large-scale strategic warfare—as profound a change as any in modern times.

Even now, as the century wanes, physicists remain our scientific Brahmins. They dominate government committees, holding forth on topics far beyond their nominal expertise—defense, environmental riddles, social policy. Yet in our growing environmental problems and the rapid advances in other laboratories, far from the physics departments of the great campuses, a clarion call is sounding through our time.

I believe that we stand on the threshold of the Biological Century. While the particle physicists desperately try to get their Superconducting Super Collider built in Texas, against growing opposition

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to the $9 billion price tag, a smaller initiative proceeds: the Human Genome Project. This vast effort, eventually costing about $3 billion, will map the human genetic code—our DNA.

The Project's director is James Watson, co-discoverer of DNA with Francis Crick. It is the largest job ever attempted in biology, but surely not the last foray of biologists into Big Science, where physicists are already right at home.

I recently heard Watson talk about the ethical implications of being able to know who has defective genes. "What will it mean when we can be sure we're not all born equal?" he asked, and I had to admit it was probably going to scare a lot of people. Insurance companies will not want to cover people with a genetic predisposition to illness, for example.

But those are short-term ethical questions, surely. The true solution lies in fixing genes, not merely reading them. If parents-to-be can have their problem genes edited into normal ones, most of the issues may evaporate.

And this is just one of many advances which portend much. Will we stop at cleaning up what we see as defects? I doubt it.

As we all saw in grade school, once you learn how to read a book, somebody is going to want to write one—that's how authors are made. Once we know how to read our own genetic code, someone is going to want to rewrite that 'text', tinker with traits—play God, some would say.

But that lies a few decades off, I believe. The first signs of a quiet revolution in our daily lives will probably come with some pretty noncontroversial commercial products. Much research has gone into cellular critturs which can digest oil spills or other toxic contaminants. Some work reasonably well already. Soon enough such research will give us a spectrum of organisms which digest unpleasant substances. That should mean refineries which don't stink, rivers that don't catch on fire and aren't sewers.

Plants have plenty of chemical defenses, and a smart farmer will come to use that. In temperate zones, winter is the best insecticide; it keeps the bugs in check. The tropics enjoy no such respite, so plants there have developed a wide range of alkaloids which kill off nosy insects and animals. Nicotine is an excellent insect foe; the fact that we addict to it is a curious side effect. Adapting such defenses to orchards and crops is an obvious path for biotech.

Consider the farm of the next century, which we might better call

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a "pharm"—because it may well be devoted to growing proteins, not wheat. Already researchers can synthesize proteins in animals by co-opting their own schemes for making, for example, milk.

Genetically altered goats have been made to yield in their milk a particular *human* protein which effectively dissolves the fibrin clots responsible for coronary occlusions. Efficiencies are low, but probably won't remain so. To get high yields, it will be a good idea to go to the dairy cow, which produces 10,000 liters of milk a year.

Imagine a Heifer which yields insulin, the expensive aid to diabetics. We could make such a cow by editing its genes which control the cow's internal chemistry. The simple way would be to make two kinds of Heifers, one which produces milk rich in the "alpha" chain that helps make up insulin, and a second which makes the "beta" chain. This would free the cows from having to contend with insulin in their own systems, for only when the alpha and beta chains are mixed do we get insulin itself.

Insulin grown down on the pharm would probably be much cheaper than ours today. Similarly, there seems no barrier to making many pharmaceuticals in natural systems. Sheep might be specialized to a whole range of useful drugs, for example.

Sheep, goats and cows would become the essential "bioreactors," reproducing themselves in a barnyard biotech which could benefit many farmers who never heard of protein tinkering. But there will be troubles, because such animals don't breed true. A dairyman in Argentina will have to come back to Pharms Unlimited for his next calf. Indeed, Pharms Unlimited would be mad to make its cows so they can reproduce their (patented!) technology without a fat fee. So the Third World may see this as just another way to keep them on an unending economic string.

Such technology will spread into the immensely profitable realm of direct consumer goods. Let's start with some simple items, kinds so commonplace they can be advertised on television.

Imagine a kitchen cleanser which dissolves waste in those hard-to-get places, maybe even invading the grouting of tile in pursuit of fungus. Or a bath mat which slowly tugs itself across the floor, slurping up puddles, deposits of soap and hair spray, hairs, general 'human dander'. It lives on the stuff, plus an occasional helpful dollop of diet supplements from the otherwise distracted homemaker—who thinks of it as a rug, not a pet.

But many products, the opening

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wedge, will be less startling—in fact, that's why they'll come first. Resident 'toothpaste' that does the essential policing up after lunch, and maybe even makes your breath smell, well, not so bad. Stomach guardians which ward off Montezuma's Revenge before you notice a single symptom—permanently, because the microbes are symbiotic with you, and live throughout your digestive system.

Much further along, let's open up our imaginations. Maybe there will be a fashion in bio-corduroy, which lives off your sloughed-off skin, perspiration—and even, if you like, some of your less agreeable excretions.

The theme here is biological balance—what's waste to one creature can become food to another—with a desirable job done in the transaction. This is "homeostasis," the biological equivalent of the thermostat.

Tougher jobs, such as mining, could be done by 'worms' which forage, digest and concentrate desirable elements. 'Oysters' could lie on the sea bed, amassing from the water a valuable 'sand' the biotechnicians like—gold, platinum, even mercury.

Of course, agriculture is the ancient biotech. For many millennia we've been breeding cows and corn, collard greens and collies, all to our whim. We can expect more exotic foods, of course, but more important, we may see new and better ways of growing them.

Ponder a subtle marriage of the acacia ant with the orange tree. In the wild, the ant serves the acacia tree by eating nearby saplings and competing weeds (a weed, after all, is not a biological category; it's merely a plant somebody doesn't like), by fighting off invading insects, and other functions a plant can't handle.

In return the ant gets to eat delicious parts of the acacia, which have evolved as just such an enticing reward. Suppose we generalize that scheme to our orange crops, or any other plant we want to protect. Away with insecticides! And the farmer doesn't have to spend nearly so much time checking up.

One of the troubles with such apparently open-ended future projections is that we have no firm idea what the limitations on biotech will be. Chances are, they'll be wilder than we think; imagine the Frenchmen who rode hot air balloons gazing at the lunar crescent, and trying to glimpse the century-long path that led through the airplane and the rocket to Tranquility Base.

From our blinkered perspective, a Biological Century looks like a fundamental shift in worldview. Once we learn the trick of reproduc-

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tion *a la* nature, not *a la* factory, we may see a collision between the classical economy of scarcity and one of bio-plenty. Thinkers like Freeman Dyson have been pointing out that the specters which haunt our present—strip-mining and burning up our dwindling resources—may be as narrow a vision as was Spain's obsession with taking gold out of the New World, while missing tobacco, the potato, "love apples" (tomatoes) and the rest.

Biotech opens the promise that the truly fundamental resources will be sunlight, water and land—privileging the tropical South and 'green tech'. This could neatly turn the tables on the industrial, 'gray tech' North which will develop the biotech in the first place. (Spain sent Columbus, but missed the boat conceptually in the following century.)

An immense payoff for a small, but self-reproducing investment of 'smart' biotech is a daunting possibility. We primates dropped jackrabbits into Australia before we knew their long-range impact. This point is not lost on the new Luddites of our time, the Jeremy Rifkin crowd which fears any biotech product, and considers animal husbandry as "slavery."

Perhaps such potential plenty can stave off the obvious problem faced by the 'Third World' — already an antiquated term, for there is no 'Second World' left, beyond a few wilting dictatorships. Biotech crops—the Green Revolution—have already helped the starvation problems in the tropics. But I suspect biotech alone cannot stop the rapid growth of human numbers there. So what will happen?

The right term might be 'die-backs'—sudden, catastrophic collapse of whole life support structures on a regional level; the Four Horsemen writ large. I believe, though, that two social forces will bring even more dire events.

Consider: we will have a North with many accomplished bio-engineers. Given our desire to extend our own lifespans, much research will have gone into an intricate fathoming of the human immune system, to fixing our cardiovascular plumbing, and the like.

On the other hand, the North will increasingly be appalled with the South's runaway numbers. Megaci-ties will sprawl, teeming with seedy, corrupt masses. Torrents of illegal immigration will pour over borders. Responding to deprivation, crazed politico/religious movements will froth and foment, few of them appetizing as seen from a Northern distance.

The more the North thinks of humanity as a malignancy, the more we will unconsciously long for disasters.

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Somewhere, sometime, someone will see a simple solution combining these two forces: the Designer Plague. An airborne form of, say, a super-influenza. The Flu From Hell, carried on a cough, with a several-week incubation period, so the plague path will be hard to follow. Maybe fine-tuned, too, carrying a specific trait that confines it to tropical climes, as malaria is (mostly).

Would anyone be mad enough to kill billions, hoping to stave off the ecological and cultural collapse of societies? It seems despicable, mad—and quite plausible, to me. Speculations along these lines have already been voiced by Mark Martin, a molecular biologist. The zealot could well come from citadels of high moral purpose, too. After all, the great mass murderer of our century came from the culture of Mozart and Goethe, and was a vegetarian.

Such dark possibilities come with any major advance in human capabilities. Only by anticipating them, as H.G. Wells foresaw atomic war, can we do the thinking and imagining that might prevent them.

Science fiction has seen big changes coming before, and done a reasonable job at avoiding our getting blindsided. We did a workmanlike job on the rocket, the bomb, the robot and the computer. Still, it's worth remembering that though our computers fascinate us, consider the organ that's being fascinated itself.

Our brains have about a hundred thousand times the connections in a state-of-the-art Cray computer. These connections work about a hundred thousand times faster than the comparable computer networks. This yields an organism with about ten billion times the capabilities of our billion-dollar number-crunchers. Consider what could be done by modifying some of the wiring diagram of that brain, or perhaps just some of its inherent chemistry. The potential for vast improvement or vast damage is immense.

Our currently common idea of software running on hardware works for machines, but not for brains. Brains modify themselves in response to strong inputs; they don't just store data in files. They form new patterns for thinking—self-programming and self-hardwiring.

To reflect this, I think we will need a new category—liveware.

Like art, 'living' is a property nobody can define exactly but everybody thinks they can recognize. The virtue of live technology is the same as the dray horse—it can look after itself, in its own fashion. Cropping grass, relieving itself, burning that grass for energy in its belly, the horse does a lot of its own maintenance. Liveware would similarly police up its own act, and be able to make copies of itself into the bar-

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gain, just like the dray.

Of course, a bioteched piece of liveware will be patentable —that's already established in principle— and, alas, mutable. Once made, it can undergo mutation and make something we did not intend.

Intention is the crux of the moral issues we will face. The abortion battles of our day will pale compared with the far more intimate and intricate capabilities that yawn just a decade or two away.

In the USA abortion won't go away as an issue, mostly because we keep trying to settle it through the courts. I suspect the Supreme Court will follow established practice and turn such a hot potato back to the states to decide, as they once tried to do with slavery. But that won't work when changes come thick and fast, as they are starting to.

Already Brahmins in India use amniocentesis to determine the sex of an embryo early on—and then preferentially abort the girls, because sons are more prized. This "genetic counseling" frames a typical conflict between our easy categories. Where does 'reproductive choice' end when it systematically acts against females? If allowed to go on, we could produce harrowing population differences far from the near-50/50 balance of sexes, a testosterone-steeped society with more crime and war. I don't know the answers here, but I do know that the questions will get tougher.

And more subtle, as well. The first genetic tuning will be for the elimination of inheritable diseases—kidney disorders, hemophilia and the like. Then will come cosmetics: eye and hair color, skin tint, maybe breast size (look at the implant industry today) and height.

These are plenty, but what if parents can tailor their children for beauty? A firm jaw for men, a sunny smile for women? We all know that good-looking people do well. What parent could resist the argument that they were giving the child a powerful leg up (maybe literally) in the competitive world?

Somewhere, law or fashion or deeper arguments will draw the line. But wherever that line occurs, there is the familiar problem of oversubscription. Just as a Bachelor's degree was once a proud emblem, now tarnished by being commonplace, beauty—and maybe even brains—will come to be so. Indeed, since beauty is another form of fashion, generations may sport trendy noses and thighs, as now we see passing fads in children's names.

Of course, the first genetic editing and rewriting will be done for the rich. One of our challenges will be to spread the benefit, or else a class separation will develop of frightful complexity and depth. We

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could reach the stage in which one could spot the rich by their looks, or even their smarts.

Or their mates. Classical liberalism holds that information is good. *And the truth shall make you free!* Why, then, should a prospective bride not know the precise genetic endowment she would get from a candidate swain? We are just beginning to consider whether a genetic propensity for disease should be made known to insurance companies or employers.

Those legal battles can be settled in the context of privacy rights. But how about something as intensely personal as marriage? People care deeply about their children. It seems plausible that they would want to know what they are getting before going to the altar.

All these naturally arising problems will tend to make us think of other people as anthologies of genetic traits—to atomize. This reflects science's tendency to slice and dice experience for convenience of analysis, but it is a poor model for knitting up the already raveled threads of a tattered society.

So somewhere, a line must be drawn. It had better be fixed by open public debate, rather than by our current method of leaving it up to lawyers in courtrooms, who usually know little and care less.

Other developments, just over the horizon, will probably force us to entirely rethink present ideas of good and evil. Within a generation, we will probably be able to make cocaine from a bacterial culture. Kids will grow it or morphine or opium or marijuana—in bathtubs, not in elaborate labs.

This will do for our current drug prohibition what home-brewed beer did for Prohibition. Even easier ways are plausible: say, a bacterium which lives in your digestive tract and makes just the right level of cocaine every day. (Something like this has happened naturally. A patient turned up who was permanently drunk, from a yeast which made alcohol in his innards.) Far more exotic methods of eluding detection, and of making new designer drugs, will no doubt emerge.

Such a ready supply will almost certainly doom a simple War On Drugs approach. Legalizing, taxing and regulating their use will come to be far cheaper than following a Prohibition mentality against an ever-improving biotechnology.

In fact, I believe it already is cheaper and smarter. We have 1,300,000 in prisons in the USA, the majority for drug-related crime. The average sentence for murder in California is for fewer years (eight) than the average sentence for drug crimes. Biotech will make these problems far worse, forcing a new social solu-

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tion, probably resembling the European solutions already using partial legalization.

Out of playfulness, I've scrambled many ideas together without talking about when they might come. To orient ourselves, I would call 'mundane' the measures which have obvious market roles right away, and little social resistance. This includes pollution-policers, simple bathroom cleaners, crops that resist pests and herbicides, pharm animals, "designer" plants (blue roses, low-cal fruit), bacterial mining, and the like. Even correcting human inheritable diseases will probably go through without major opposition. All this, perhaps within the first two decades of the new century.

The battles will begin in earnest with conceivable but startling capabilities. The list is long. Big changes in our own genome. Harnessing natural behaviors to new tasks (the acacia ant-orange tree marriage). Designer animals, like a green Siamese cat to match your furniture, or a talking collie (and what *would* it say?). These may preoccupy the middle of the next century.

Even further out would be major alterations in the biosphere, and in us. Adapting ourselves to live in vacuum or beneath the sea, or to convert sunlight directly into energy, would alter the human prospect beyond recognition. Changing *homo sapiens* to something beyond will be a step fraught with emotion and peril. Such issues will loom large as the Biological Century runs out. And what could lurk beyond that horizon? The mind boggles.

All these are mere glimpses of what awaits us. A century is an enormous span, stretching our foresight to the full. Reflect that H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* was written only a century ago. Biotech can usher in as profound a revolution as industrialization did in the early nineteenth century. It will parallel vast other themes—the expansion of artificial intelligence, the opening of the inner solar system to economic use, and much, much more.

The Achilles heel of predictions is that we cannot know the limitations of biotechnology until we get there. A nineteenth-century dreamer might easily generalize from the forthcoming radio to envision sending not merely messages by the new 'wireless', but people. Matter, after all, is at bottom a 'message'. But there's more to it than that, and the awesome radio didn't develop into a matter transmitter, which is no closer to reality than it was then.

So undoubtedly I'm wrong about some of these dreams of mine, particularly the timing. What I will bet on is that, despite the current fashion for 'nanotechnology'—artifice

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on the scale of a nano-meter, the molecular level—biotech will come first. It is easier to implement, because the tiny 'programs' built into life forms have been written for us by Nature, and tested in her lab.

In fact, some of the most interesting prospects of nanotech-like thinking come from biological materials. The basic mystery in biology is how proteins figure out how to fold themselves, which determines myriad biological functions. An obvious long chain molecule to fold and use as a construction material is DNA itself. A self-replicating 'bio-brick' could be as strong as any plastic.

Consider adding bells and whistles at the molecular level, through processes of DNA alteration. Presumably one could then make intricately malleable substances, capable of withstanding a lot of wear and able to grow more of itself when needed.

It isn't fundamentally crazy to think of side-stepping the entire manufacturing process for even bulky, ordinary objects, like houses. We have always grown trees, cut them into pieces, and then put the boards back together to make our homes. Maybe we will someday grow rooms intact, right from the root, customized down to the door-sills and window sizes. Choose your rooms, plant carefully, add water and step back. Cut out the middleman.

Whether such dreams ever happen, it seems clear that using biology's instructions will change the terms of social debate before nanotech gets off the ground.

The rate of change of our own conception of ourselves will probably speed up from its present breakneck pace. The truly revolutionary force in modern times has been science, far more than revolutionary politics or the like. That seems likely to be even more true in future.

Yet the above examples underline the implications of leaving genetic choices to individuals. Perhaps here we see the beginnings of a profound alteration in the essential doctrine of modern liberal democratic ideology. There may be genetic paths we will choose to block.

Our species has made enormous progress through swift cultural evolution. Now that quick uptake on changing conditions can come from genetic change. This tilts the game back to Nature's rules, but with us at the controls, not pitiless, random mutation.

It is as though prodigious, bountiful Nature for billions of years has tossed off variations on its themes like a gushing Mozart. Now Nature finds one of its casual creations has come back, grown searching vision, and is eyeing Her oddly.

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Vance Aandahl's "The First Invention" brings us back to the issue's motif, that of exotic societies. Vance recreates a period for which we have no documentation — only physical evidence and speculation. The perfect jump-off point for a science fiction story. . . .

The First Invention

By Vance Aandahl

NALA BURROWED HER fingers deep into the moist earth til she found a yam. She rubbed off the dirt and jammed it into her mouth. It was sweet and good. It would feed her and the baby growing inside her.

Crouching there on her hands and knees, she chewed fast and swallowed. Insects buzzed in the tall grass. The sun beat down on her back. Droplets of sweat fell from her face as she dug for another yam, her eyes fixed on the soil. She was only vaguely aware of Kir digging beside her and the others too, the whole family down on their hands and knees rooting up this little yam patch they'd been lucky enough to stumble across and devouring the yams with the silent intensity of people who haven't eaten for a long time.

Nala found another yam. She was wedging it into her mouth when she saw Kir lift his head, his nostrils flaring. Suddenly his eyes bulged with fear.

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She looked up and saw what he saw. A beast with tusks curling out of its snout stood in the grass at the edge of the yam patch. It locked eyes with Nala, snorted and tossed its head, then charged at full speed. She spit out her mouthful of yam and barked to warn the others.

Screaming, they sprang up and scattered. Nala struggled to her feet, awkward with the weight of the baby inside her. Kir grabbed her arm and shoved her ahead of him, forcing her into a cumbersome run, pushing her in the small of the back to make her go faster.

Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the tusker bearing down on little Zan. Then it veered sharply and ran toward her and Kir. On the open grassland there was nowhere to hide. She felt a surge of fear in her throat and tried to run faster, but her belly was heavy and her hip ached and she was weary from days of hunger.

Kir uttered a sobbing cry. Nala glanced back again and saw that the tusker was almost upon them. Lunging wildly, Kir threw her sideways and she fell to the ground. She lay there whimpering. She could hear thrashing noises in the grass. Trembling, she rolled over and lifted her head.

The tusker had turned and run back to the yam patch. It sniffed here and there, inspecting the dug-up dirt, then lay down and closed its eyes.

Nala heard a gasp of pain. Kir was lying on his back holding one leg in the air. Keeping an eye on the tusker, she crawled over to him. He was breathing heavily and chewing on his lip with his eyes shut. To escape the tusker he had run through a thorn bush, and the thickly calloused sole of his foot was punctured in four places. She locked her arm around his ankle and pulled out the long, thick thorns. He groaned in a low voice. As she cradled his foot in her hands, blood ran from the wounds and trickled through her fingers.

Warily the other members of the family gathered around Nala and Kir. Still fearful of the tusker, they crouched low in the grass and kept quiet. The only sound was the raspy edge of pain in Kir's breathing. They stared hard at his foot and shook their heads.

Old Nerak stood upright and gestured toward the mountains to the west. For many days the family had been walking in that direction. Now the snowy peaks stood tall in the sky. A valley lay nestled in the foothills, a wonderful place where fruit trees grew in abundance and no one had ever seen a big cat. Every year they journeyed to that valley and feasted on the ripe fruit. Now the valley was only a day or two away. But could Kir

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walk for a day or two? Could he even stand?

All of them were weak after their long journey across the grasslands, but Kir was the weakest. On the infrequent occasions when they had found food, he had given most of his share to Nala.

Biting his lip, Kir struggled to his feet and took a few hobbling steps toward the mountains, as though determined to prove to the others he could not only make it to the valley but lead them there. He limped horribly, on the verge of collapse. Nala rushed to his side. He stopped and leaned against her. She put her arm around his back and tried to support him, but she wasn't strong enough to help much. He looked at her imploringly, then squeezed his eyes as he took another step on his wounded foot. They walked haltingly forward. She felt waves of love and fear rolling through her body. She realized she was crying. Tears coursed down her cheeks. He gave her shoulder a feeble squeeze with his fingers.

One by one the others passed by, averting their eyes. The grassy plain was a dangerous place. The family had already been too long in crossing it. They were exhausted. No one had the strength to stay behind and help. Nala and Kir watched the others walk away until their figures sank out of sight beyond a low ridge. Then Kir hung his head and slumped into Nala's side.

She looked around for a safe place to rest and saw a lone tree standing off to their left. Barking softly, she lifted his chin and turned his head. When he saw the tree, he nodded.

Together they limped toward it. Kir sucked in his breath with every step. Finally they reached the tree. It was huge, with roots like a giant's knees.

Nala found a hollow spot in the sandy soil between two of the roots. With a groan of relief Kir collapsed into it. He lay there panting til his eyes closed. Nala got down on her hands and knees and studied the sole of his foot. In the deep shade of the tree it was difficult to see. The thorn wounds had stopped bleeding, but the flesh around them was puffy and red. She lay next to him, trying to regain some of her strength. He kept muttering in his sleep, voicing muffled yelps of pain. She put her hand on her swollen belly and wept again. She felt the baby move. The baby was hers but it was his too. He had put a little bit of himself inside her each time they mated. In this way, she reasoned, he had helped her to make the baby.

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All her life Nala had sensed something important hovering just beyond the reach of her mind. She was sure that if she thought hard enough, someday she would understand how to do something no one else had ever done. She didn't have any idea what this might be, but somehow she felt sure it would change her life and the lives of everyone else in the family too. The feeling she experienced whenever she contemplated this secret sense of destiny was much the same as the feeling that filled her now. For a moment she forgot that Kir was likely to die. She thought only of the baby inside her. The joy of motherhood engulfed her. But she was too tired to stay awake. She closed her eyes and slept deeply.

When Nala awoke, the sun hung low in the sky. In the branches overhead she could hear a hornbill clacking its beak. Kir still slept beside her, quietly now. Nala's mouth was parched. When she looked around and realized they were alone, panic swept her. Where was the family? Then she remembered what had happened. She and Kir had been left behind. When she stood up, her head spun. She felt weaker now than she had before she fell asleep. Her hip ached and the weight of her belly dragged her down. She curled next to Kir and slept some more.

All night long they clung to each other for warmth, sleeping fitfully. In one of her dreams Nala kept looking at her hands. She was holding a stick that was forked at one end. She glanced up and saw the tusker charging. She dropped the stick and cried out in despair. The sound of her own voice awoke her.

IT WAS dawn. She arose feeling stronger but also very thirsty. Scudding banks of dark purple clouds filled the sky, washing the landscape with a strange morning twilight.

Nala's skin was hot, her mouth dry as sand. She needed water. She would search til she found some, then return to the tree to fetch Kir. There were water holes on the grassy plain but it wasn't always easy to locate one. She scanned the horizon til she saw a low place where the foliage appeared slightly greener than elsewhere. Maybe she would find water there. She set off cautiously in that direction.

Dry stalks of grass ticked against Nala's shins. Fearful of morning hunters, she kept her attention focused on the land around her. The only animals she saw were a herd of grasseaters a long way off. The clouds overhead grew steadily darker and the air crackled with unseen energy.

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She was struck by the notion that the sun had grown too weak to continue its climb into the sky and was sinking back out of sight again. The idea frightened her and she shivered.

Soon Nala came to a thicket of leafy bushes — the greenery she'd seen from the tree. These bushes were taller than the grasses around them. Fans of thin leaves and tightly bunched clusters of buds brushed against her face and shoulders as she pushed her way through the thicket, studying the ground for signs of water. The leaves left a sticky residue of resin on her skin, and the air was full of pollen. The pollen had a rich, pungent odor that made her head buzz. She found no water. If anything, the soil here seemed drier than elsewhere.

The clouds hung black and gloomy overhead as she left the thicket and headed back toward the tree. She'd only taken a few steps when she felt all the hair on her body stand straight out and tingle. She spun around.

With a deafening thunderclap lightning struck the center of the thicket. The force of it threw Nala back on her haunches. Stunned, she struggled to her feet. She had seen many lightning bolts but never one so close. The jagged flash of light had been enormous in size and terribly powerful.

She stared at the center of the thicket. The bushes there lay flattened to the ground, no longer green but black. Some sort of dark mist was rising into the air — she'd never seen anything like it before. And what was that? A tiny piece of the lightning had broken off and been left behind!

Barking with excitement, Nala crouched down and edged a little closer. She could see the piece of lightning dancing and jumping through the bushes. It was growing larger. Heart pounding, she moved closer til she was just inside the edge of the thicket.

A sudden gust of wind blew the strange dark mist directly into her face. She took a deep breath of it and choked. It burned her throat and eyes. She couldn't see anything. Coughing furiously, gasping for breath, swatting at the air with her hands, she retreated. Her heel caught on something and she stumbled backwards. She grabbed at one of the bushes and swung to the ground instead of falling. She sat there coughing miserably. But then the wind changed and the air was good again.

She rubbed her stinging eyes. Dazed, she stood up. She could see the piece of lightning at the center of the thicket. It was growing rapidly now, spreading outwards, filling the air with more and more of the unpleasant stuff that looked like mist but wasn't.

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Fascinated, Nala stared at the lightning. It was a new kind of lightning, she realized — ground lightning. As it spread over the earth, it ate the grass and the bushes and left charred stubble in their place. Now the lightning was coming closer. She felt a wave of heat, like the sunshine when the sun stands high in the sky, only hotter. She sensed there was much to know about this new kind of lightning. As it flickered closer, she struggled to understand it, and she felt that familiar presentiment of being on the verge of some marvelous accomplishment.

Another lightning bolt flashed, this one far away, a thin zigzag of light against the black mass of clouds. Distant thunder rumbled. Nala felt a raindrop splatter on her shoulder, and a moment later rain came pouring down all around her. She tipped back her head to catch what she could in her parched mouth. Through the downpour she heard the ground lightning hissing like an angry snake. It was shrinking even faster than it had grown, disappearing under torrents of rain.

Nala approached one of the bushes. Rainwater was trickling off its branches. She circled the bush, tipping each twig so the water on the leaves would spill into her mouth. She felt strange as she drank, light-headed yet alert. The heaviness had left her body. She felt like she was floating in water.

Her foot hit something and she looked down. She'd stepped on a stick. She sat down and looked at it. It was thick and strong and forked at one end, just like the stick she'd been holding in her dream. She struggled to remember the dream, but she couldn't. Her head was buzzing so much it felt like she was in a dream now too, a different sort of dream, a real one that would last forever.

Suddenly she remembered the tusker. She seized the stick and staggered to her feet. She imagined the tusker charging straight at her. She gripped the stick firmly in both hands and swung the forked end wildly back and forth through the rain. In her mind she could see the sharp points of the fork striking the tusker again and again, tearing open its throat and puncturing its eyes.

The image horrified Nala. Nauseous and shuddering, she dropped the stick and sat down again. The ground was covered with a bed of twigs that had fallen from the bushes. She looked sourly at the stick for a moment, then picked up one of the twigs.

The twig was thin and delicate with alternating fans of five leaves

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each. She touched one of the leaves. It felt sticky and rough. It was thin with notched edges like the teeth of a lizard. She rubbed it into a pinch of green paste between her thumb and forefinger and tasted it. Then she gripped the twig firmly at each end and tried to break it. It snapped but the two pieces didn't come apart. She twisted the twig and jerked it, wrenching it this way and that. Finally she bent over and bit it, but even then she couldn't separate the two pieces.

Looking closely, she discovered many long thin fibers running through the twig. If she took one fiber, she could snap it. But together they were very strong. She worried the twig in her hands, exposing the fibers, testing their strength and pliability with her fingers.

Suddenly an image of Kir sprang to life in her mind. She'd forgotten him! A deep pang of longing shot through Nala. She had to hurry back to where he was waiting for her by the tree. She had to help him reach the valley.

Abruptly it stopped raining. The sudden silence sang inside Nala's head. Beams of morning sunlight played across her hands.

As the storm clouds parted, Nala's need came together with her knowledge. She looked at the stick and she looked at the twig fibers in her hands and she looked at the soft grass growing all around her — and calmly she saw what it was she had been destined all her life to do.

Moving slowly, as though in a dream, she collected a few more of the twigs, then pulled up a lot of the grass. Carefully she placed these materials next to the stick. Her head was buzzing like a beehive. She began to work, doing things with her fingers no one had ever done before. She made mistakes and had to start over many times, but each time she came closer to what it was she saw so clearly in her mind. The stink from the charred center of the thicket bothered her, and she missed Kir. Cradling the thing she was making against her breasts, she left the thicket and walked back toward the tree.

Halfway there, she hunkered down and went back to work. At last she was finished. She had done it. What she held in her hands was crude and misshapen, but it would work. She was sure of it.

Clutching her creation tightly in both hands, Nala lurched to her feet and hurried back to the tree as quickly as her aching hip and heavy belly would let her. When she got there, Kir was standing up, leaning against the tree, supporting his weight on his good foot. He looked a little

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stronger. Smiling proudly, he pointed at something he'd found: rainwater from the branches had flowed down the trunk and collected in a shallow cup at the juncture of two roots. Together they drank from the pool til it was gone.

Then she showed him what she'd made. Kir looked at it with dull incomprehension in his eyes. Gently Nala positioned it under his arm. His armpit rested comfortably on the pad of soft grass that she'd tied with twig fibers to the forked end of the stick. The other end of the stick was planted firmly on the ground. He leaned on it and the stick supported him. Suddenly he understood. Chattering softly with excitement, he took one tentative step, then another, then another. He could walk like this without having to use his wounded foot. It would be hard, clumsy work, but she could help him to keep his balance by bracing him on the other side.

With a little yelp of joy Kir dropped the stick and sank to his knees in front of Nala. He gave her distended belly a gentle hug. The baby inside kicked once, twice. She saw his eyes open wide and knew he'd felt those little kicks — felt them softly against his cheek. In the branches overhead, the hornbills made a noisy racket, clacking their beaks in celebration, then quieted again.

Kir grabbed the stick and used it to bring himself to his feet. Nala gestured toward the mountains. He gazed in that direction with hope in his eyes. Carefully he positioned the stick under his arm. Then he put his other arm over her shoulders and they hobbled off at a steady, determined pace.

Nala's heart was hammering in her throat. Her head still hummed and buzzed from the strange mistlike stuff she'd inhaled. All the colors of the grassland around her seemed incredibly rich and vivid. She felt certain she and Kir would reach the valley safely and rejoin the family. She would give birth to their baby there. She knew this just as she knew she had finally fulfilled her destiny.

Nala had made something good. She was a maker. And somehow she knew that her children and her children's children would be makers too. She knew it. Her mind filled with wonderful visions. She saw her descendants making drums from hollow logs and flutes from marsh reeds. She saw them curing illnesses by eating roots and healing wounds by plastering them with leaves. She saw them weaving special combinations

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of feathers and flowers in their hair to protect themselves from tuskers and big cats. She saw them growing whole palaces of living foliage out of the jungle by singing songs of exceptional sweetness and wisdom to the bamboo shoots and ferns and orchid vines. And she knew with a perfect sureness of vision that they would dwell in these green mansions for a million years, at peace with each other, in harmony with nature, devoted only to beauty and love, until at last they learned how to fly on wings of pure thought, and then they would soar in a single gentle breath to the stars themselves.

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Tanith Lee is a British writer of fantasy, science fiction, and children's novels and stories, with over forty books to her credit. She has appeared in all the major science fiction magazines, and has won both the World Fantasy Award and the British Fantasy Award. She has also written for radio and television. "Ondralume" is a wonderful slip-stream story, with a definitive Lee touch.

Ondralume

By Tanith Lee

. . . And now we dance the salamander's dance
Surrounded by the fire . . . .

SO THE POET Vult had written in his stone tower seven kirts to the east. And many more kirts away, another poet in another land had written in his marble house these words: *Cinder-eyed, we children of the unkind, turn upon our pyre.*

Ondain raised her statue's face to the sky. Beneath her veil, her pale golden hair shone at the sun's terror. As with all her people, all people of all the lands of Ondralume, her eyes were silver, not cinders, yet like cinders they felt; she, too, was the salamander. She raised her golden arms, her hands in the gesture of prayer. "Give us this day the rain, we entreat you. Give us this day our life."

The sky had been a soft turquoise-green, so she still remembered it.

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Now it was brown, and pinkish with great swathes of dust. The sun was a ball of pain. It hurt to think of the sun. From everything the long, hot shadows cut like wounds.

The hills were only hardenings of the sky, darker, redder. On the sides of the hills lay the whitening bones of things that had died when the grass withered and the streams shrank to cracks of steam.

In the stone village, many had gone to their houses, shut the doors and windows, and not come out. The dry fountains on the oblong plazas stood in attitudes of thirst. Whole villages died in this way in all the lands.

To the north, in the mountains, bones lay thick as the snow that no longer gathered there.

The drought had lasted one entire lumin, and the seasons of the lumin had not changed it, but had been changed. The cold time was a heat. A yearlong heat without pity, without a breeze, without one single bead of rain.

At Ondain's back the temple showed its pure facade, its tall apertures opening to the ground, the walls and floors of marble no longer cool, burning white and pink like the world.

The other priestesses waited in their soft robes, their arms upraised and hands in the gesture of prayer. They sang the hymn to the rain, composed by the poet Vult ninety lumins ago, when rain yet fell, a thankful hymn born after the Time of the Fear.

Ondain sang every fifth line alone, her sweet voice lifting as her hands did, to the sky.

The gods would hear her. The gods must hear. Why this punishment? What had they done amiss?

Send us your mantle of water, sang the priestesses, and the crowds below in the valley, catching the words clearly from the great amphitheater of the temple, wept their burned-out tears. So many tears and not one tear of rain. How was it possible? There had been the Ceremony of Weeping held as never before in Ondain's lifetime. Her sister, Unniet, had been chosen to lead it. Unniet was perfect in her beauty, only fifteen lumins in age. She had begun the Weeping, and she and her fellows had Wept all through the dark. They had spoken of their miseries and the agony of the people; they had remembered the Time of the Fear when the sun vanished and the stars went out. How they had Wept, in confusion and fright.

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But dawn broke like rock. The dust rose from the bowls of the valleys, and copper shade was on the hills. In the villages a hundred more went in and shut their doors.

The Ceremony of Weeping had not ended the drought, as the sacrifice of the last horned cattle had not ended it.

The hymn finished. The High Priest on his eminence turned and gazed upon the priestesses, and the people in the valley. Above his robe, his head was masked by the skull of one of the great fire eagles. The eagles still survived the drought, still circled sharply above the plains, searching for carrion the sun had not picked clean. Long since, all other birds had fallen songless from the scorched skies. The eagle mask was the sign of strength, and through its eyelets the silver eyes of the High Priest stared from another country that lay between the world and the heaven of the gods.

"Go now to your homes," said the High Priest, his voice borne like the eagle to the edges of the valley. "Fast there, and drink only a little of your wine though your thirst be great. Scourge yourselves if you can bear it. During every lur, kneel often and offer penitence to the gods. They must be appeased. Go now to your homes."

With a dreadful faint sighing, the people began to disperse along the straight roads between the marble posts. All across the lands, such priests prayed and gave such instructions. It would be easy to fast: there was little to eat, and bellies had shrunk, and mouths were dry as dust that wine did not slake — and anyway, the wine ran low in the jar, as the last river had run before it vanished like a worm into the earth. And they were easy, too, prayer and chastisement, for the heart churned always with horror and grief. There would be eighty burials, paraphrase of thousands elsewhere, this lur, most of them children. They would go into the little neat graves beside the graveyards of the sacred pets, the slim cats and birds and snakes who had already perished. And in the places of adult death, also, the white markers rose like new flowers that grew despite the drought.

The priestesses moved in a mild white wind under the arches of the temple. The High Priest beckoned to Ondain.

"Father?"

"Maiden, something more must be done."

"I know it," she said. And a circlet of fire enclosed her waist, pressing on her.

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"Our last resort. Our last display to heaven that we acknowledge our guilt and will expiate our guilt in the final extremity of blood."

Ondain bowed her head. In her cinder silver eyes, the tears that were not the rain gathered, but did not fall.

"You yourself are among the comeliest and best, and your sister, Unniet. You two will be among those sent to stand beneath the selecting light."

"I bow before your judgment."

"Whichever is chosen," the eagle mask said to her, its strange eyes remote, compassionless, and holy, approaching the eyes of gods; "whichever the light selects will in three lurs lie here before the people to die, that heaven may be satisfied."

"To this I consent, Father."

"You have no fear."

"Fear again is all about, as once before. What is my little fear to that?"

"So then he told me he was going to visit his sister at Palm Springs, and I *believed* him. I really did. I believed that son of a bitch."

Terri-Louise pulled on strands of her blonde hair viciously, some ancient Latin genetic urge to rip them out, perhaps.

"Well, I said to you, Louie, didn't I?"

"You sure did. And I sure never did listen. Why was I such a dumb fool? Tell me that?"

Too wise to attempt this feat, Terri-Louise's caller said gently, "Oh, you're not, honey. He'd have fooled anyone. He's a real syrupy bastard, that one."

"I work for the guy," said Terri-Louise, self-condemnatory; "I should have *known*. The way he treated all the others. I thought I was different. Just vanity, I guess. He's used me, and now he's gotten someone he likes better. So he wants to keep me hanging on? He can *forget* it."

"Yeah, you bet, Louie."

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do," said Terri-Louise, idly glaring down the six-hundred-floor glacier of the office building on Wideway Nine. "I'm going to take off out of here for an early weekend myself. Assistant be darned. He's just used me like any old secretary; that's all I am. Maid of all work. And bed warmer if there's nothing cuter. You care for cocktails at The Rose? I'll used my darned expense account."

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"You *bet*, Louie."

"O.K. I'll meet you there at" — Terri-Louise consulted the elaborate timepiece fastened on the wall, which was otherwise a massive representation of a cream-white ammonite, coiling in and in forever, until it hit the clock — "say, sixteen sharp."

"To the second, Louie. Oh, what'll I wear?"

"That's another thing. I'd better go now and have my manicure done. I saw a real nice gold polish. They can tint your hair up to match. Better get going."

"See you there, Louie. Bye."

"Bye."

With some satisfaction, Terri-Louise slammed down the off switch of the phone cube, releasing the image and voice of her friend in need. Although she was raw, the idea of the afternoon spent in pleasures, and the office of her hated lover left abandoned, reassured her. There was a whole list of stuff he had left her to do. She glanced about at it all, and at the towering room with its emerald chairs and sea-blue divan like a bed —and it might just as well have been — scene of her seduction and her befoolment by that *shrork*. The place was full of his executive toys. She had already started to pay him out, having heard of his infidelity this morning. Things were left unwound, things unmaintained, the plants unwatered and wilting in the fake air of these glass heights. "Oh Ms. Baume, I'm so sorry, but I have to go. I have a virus. Yes, there are so many bugs now, aren't there? I just can barely see, you know. No there's nothing to do up here."

She rose with a swing of her firm and unappreciated, carefully dieted and carelessly manhandled hips. Just let that *shrork* find out what he'd lost. Let him come in Monday and see how things swung without her ministrations. It was the weekend tomorrow. Three days of negligence.

"Yeah, and I'm not even going to feed *that*."

She glided from the office in a hail of scent, and went down in the gunshot smoothness of the elevator, humming the *Marseillaise*.

TWENTY PRIESTESSES stood in the high chamber of the marble temple on Ondralume. At their center was the great low altar, recently laved with a scant wash of wine. Incense smoldered, the smoke hurtful to arid throats. The priestesses trembled, or did

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not tremble. And the light rose from the altar, a globe like a bubble of the harsh sun itself. It lit the room fiercely, showing up the faces, all beautiful, all like statues. In the living silver eyes was tragedy or resignation, dread or ecstasy. Only Ondain's eyes were blank, a statue's eyes.

And then the light wheeled down and came to rest — upon the forehead of her sister, Unniet.

Despite all her training, Unniet cried out in terror.

It was Ondain who spoke the word. "No."

"The Truth is here," said the High Priest from the shadow. "Let none dispute it.

Unniet wept with fear.

No longer a statue, Ondain showed an awful and overwhelming concern. She went to her sister and took her hands.

"Hush now; be brave. The life of the world rests on you."

Unniet quieted in a second terror, feeling the power and onus of her fate.

"He had all these *things*," said Terri-Louise, as lemon liquor stole independently up its straw toward her lips, at the minutely air-controlled Rose. "He has a timepiece made by *Arbour*."

"My!"

"And a fossil wall, like in the da Vichi mansion."

"Really?"

"And all these African plants." She sucked the liquor. "Yum. They'll die; I didn't mist them."

"Oh Louie!"

"Now, don't 'Oh Louie' me. You said he's a bastard. And what a waste of all that money anyhow. I swear there are things in that office of his could keep a family of social dependents for a year."

"Yeah."

"Why, the rat's even gotten a whirlie."

"My *God*."

"You see?"

"You didn't —"

"Yes, I *didn't*."

"But what didn't you, Louie?"

"Didn't feed the darn old thing. Not this morning. Not tonight. Soon as

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I found out, I stopped being his devoted slave. Why should I run around misting his Africans and feeding his whirlie, when he's at Palm Springs, cooking some other pie? It's too hot for remorse."

"It's always too hot now."

Unniet went down into the cavern beneath the temple. Ondain went with her, as her sister, to undergo the purification at her side.

They stood in the basin of fluid, alike as two golden stems. They were washed with perfume, not with water. The cavern, once icy even in the heat, was warm, smelling of old bones and the grindings of rocks to dust. Now and then Unniet wept, but she did not protest; neither did Ondain say again, *No.* But Ondain thought: *She is fifteen lumins. She is afraid.* And again the words of poets came to her. *The salamander's dance surrounded by the fire. We children . . . .*

Ondain thought of all the lands, and her brain could not hold them, their mountains and plains, the blackened stands where once had bloomed their fields and flowers, the empty dishes of their lakes. She thought of the dead in the delicate graveyards, the dainty skeletons of animals and children. But again the image of Unniet weeping beside her drove these images away.

She should not die. She fears it.

Ondain considered the Time of the Fear. The wisest sages had not fathomed what had occurred. The greatest poets, such as Vult, had written of it, but offered no theory beyond the anger of the gods. But after the anger, heaven had forgiven men — for otherwise, how else should mankind have survived? It was true: many had been lost in the quaking of the earth, and some had died of pure fear, so well the time was named, as the inexplicable darkness, sunless, starless, covered the earth. It had lasted many lurs. And then, as abruptly as at its going, the sun came back over the hills and mountains, shone down upon the waters that then had graced Ondralume, reflecting like a lovely face — how they had loved the sun then, now their enemy. And by night the stars had occupied their proper places. Perhaps not so brightly arrayed; there was some debate upon this. And certain astrologers had averred that not every star was in its section. Some had vanished forever. Yet there were stars enough to light the nights of Ondralume. And over the giant fissures in the earth, the flowers grew, and in the waters, the fish played. And the children walked

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solemnly up and down the straight roads, leading their sacred long-legged birds and slender, sleek cats, or with the snakes curled about their throats like precious necklaces.

If the gods had raged, surely the gods had set rage aside.

Yet, in the time of second chance, *this* now befell them.

A tear, hot, scalded Ondain's hand from the cheek of her sister.

They stood alone, robed, below the basin, while a priestess spoke to them of the duty and the right to die to console the gods and to save the people, all the peoples of Ondralume, with their goldenness and their silver eyes.

Clyde Braxi, Jr., known to his assistant and former lover, Terri-Louise, as the *shrork*, lay in the palm of Palm Springs, a little prone to flooding now, yet still a great place, with a lush young woman from the computer terrace.

He had impressed her with many matters, not least, he assumed, his exercise-trim and safe-and-healthy Indoor Sun-tanned body and its wonders.

"And you must see my office, Sue-Ann. One wall is the da Vichi Ammonite."

"Yes?"

"And a timepiece by Arbour."

"Swell," said Sue-Ann, who was thinking about dinner and whether to wear the black or the red.

"But the best thing of all, I managed to get a whirlie."

"What the heck is a whirlie?"

"My God — you don't know?"

"I'm telling you, aren't I?"

"Well, it's a misnomer, really."

"Ms. who."

"I mean, it doesn't whirl; it spins. So fast you can't see it. Just like us."

"Are we spinning?" Sue-Ann girded herself to give further assurances to rich Mr. Braxi about his sexual athletics. But it transpired that this was not what he meant.

"They found them — out there." He waved at the window misleadingly. "A group of several hundreds. They were proved to be sentient, but nobody quite knows how. And then they die if you touch or move them.

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Or they used to. And you couldn't get one — you just could not — money no object. And then they found some safe way of capturing and transporting them, inside a kind of dome. . . ."

"Honey, what are you talking about?" asked Sue-Ann, who had come to feel that overpretense of admiration might at this point only cause complications.

"About the whirlie, for God's sake."

"Oh."

"And I had Simes get me one. It was real difficlt. But Simes is a good guy. Beautiful little thing." He must mean the whirlie? "Matches the decor of the office. I just hope" — a vague niggle, like the first intimation of indigestion, nibbled at the edges of Clyde Braxi, Jr.'s awareness — "I just hope that dumbella I have working for me remembers to feed the goddamn thing. They tell you. Don't miss a meal, on any account. You have to put the food in through this really complicated lock arrangement —"

Sue-Ann fell to wondering if Clyde Braxi, Jr., was likely to want her again before dinner, and if it would be O.K. to go and shower now.

THREE LURS passed like one. The sky was changeless brown and pink, the red hills quivered in heat haze, and the sun poured down its venom. Seventeen children died. They were the last in the villages of that temple. There were no more children. And in the wombs were only the dead, like stones, that would not be born.

No rain fell on the land about the temple, or in any of the lands of Ondralume, or in the bone-white mountains. No rain. Not a tear of it.

But Unniet wept.

She said nothing. She did not eat the provisions, the best of all that they had, that were brought to her and to Ondain. Even the sweets of honey she would not taste.

Unniet wept.

Ondain entered the inner room of the High Priest, and there, like a fast eagle, he perched upon a chair of basalt, and turned his skull toward her.

How she had gone in awe of him all her days as a priestess, and as a daughter of the villages, she had been frightened of him. But now she knew him suddenly for a man, standing between her and the gods, a guardian with a vital and fearsome labor, but only mortal. And the death's-head seemed too heavy for his fragile face. She spoke swiftly and clearly.

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"Father, Unniet is afraid to die. The gods will not accept unwilling sacrifice. It may bring worse wrath on us. The very sun may fall from the sky."

"So it may. What odds? Better perhaps than this slow torture."

Then she knew her strength, hearing the dregs of his in this terrible speech.

"Father," she said, "as Unniet's sister, I have been purified beside her; I have eaten the sacred bread and tasted the honey. Let me die in her stead. I am not afraid. I am glad to give my life for rain. I *ache* for it."

"Yes, so you do." The High Priest rose and touched her forehead as the light of selection had touched Unniet. "For this, you were prepared beside her; for this, you also were deemed worthy. Be it as you say."

In her lonely bed, Terri-Louise, slightly drunk, shed tears at her lost lover and no longer called him the *shrork*, but: *Clyde, Clyde, how could you treat me that way!*

And then she thought of the wilting Africans she had neglected, and the whirlie she had not fed, and she wept for them, too, and because she might lose her job.

The sun was stamped like a blazing nail above the hills.

In the valley the people had gathered, as in every place they would gather, where there had been time for word to reach them of the fate of the priestess, from which hung the destiny of Ondralume.

Was she beautiful and unique, enough to compensate, to entice the gods to forgive?

Ondain came out among the other priestesses, and in the valley they saw her, and that she was.

Unveiled, her head crowned with flowers of parchment, naked without shame, clad in her glamor for the eye of heaven.

The heat beat upon her body, golden as the honey of death. Behind lay the white temple where her sister wept, for Ondain now. Before her was the old fire eagle raising his arms, saluting the malign sun.

She lifted her head and prayed in her soul for her death to salve the anger of the gods. She prayed for rain, and in that moment felt a breeze upon her breasts, her lips, but it was an illusion. From her mind, she put the shadow of despair. Firmly, she went forward to the block of stone where she must

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lie. And lying down, she let them anoint her with wine and perfume under the pink-powdered brown vault that had been the sky. And Ondain thought of nothing but the words of Vult — *salamander's dance, salamander's dance* — and of the scorpion that stung itself to death surrounded by the flames. She knew; she knew it was too late.

Clyde Braxi, Jr., pelted into his towering office on Saturday, having spoken with Ms. Baume over the phone. She had talked about floods for three minutes, then told him.

He heard the timepiece groaning as he entered, for its nine-year crystal had been left uncharged on Friday. He saw the African plants lying in a heap like cabbage; he saw the toys throbbing and bobbing to the wrong tempi, and the moving picture stuck on a singularly stupid frame. But it was at the whirlie that he hurled himself.

"Oh Jesus," said Clyde Braxi, Jr.

The whirlie had changed color.

It had been an exquisite pale turquoise-green, with faintly gauzy driftings over its surface, the mimicry of clouds, as if it truly had been a tiny world — he was wrong in the origin and spelling of the word *whirlie*, which was actually *worlie*. Now it was not green or blue or gauzy. It was a ghastly orangy reddish fawn, a disgusting, nauseous tint that showed at once it had been starved, for the manual had warned him.

With shaking hands, Clyde Braxi, Jr., took out the feeder and measured a double dose into the tiny airlock contraption attached to the worlie's vacuum-sealed container-dome. He watched the food go in, disseminate, and seem never to have been. He measured out another dose, and put that in, too.

"Bitch," said Clyde Braxi, Jr. "Bitch, bitch."

Probably he had overloaded the system now. An enraged look had come onto the surface of the flawless round of the worlie. Like a boil about to erupt.

They had found them out in space, hundreds of them, these tiny things like worlds, with tiny dots of brightness like miniature suns swirling before them. Too small for life, of course, though apparently vaguely sentient. Perhaps too intelligent, for to touch or move them caused death. Then a method of minimum disturbance was devised. They were captured and quickly sealed into a soup of their own atmosphere, their "suns"

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reconstituted, their "stars" relit, or as near in facsimile as possible. Not all survived, but many did, and — providing that the computer-processed nutrients were fed into them thereafter, providing that they were not moved about save in specially constructed, stabilized boxes — they bloomed. Beautiful little things. Colorful and glowing. Friendly.

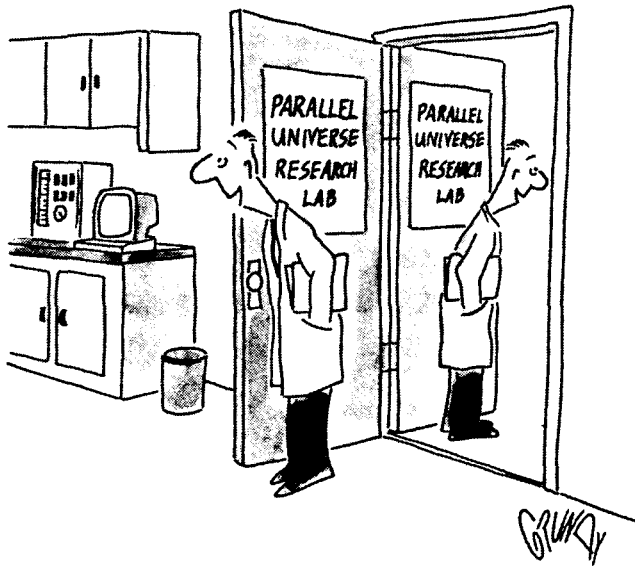
"She killed it, that bitch," said Clyde Braxi, Jr., staring at the ominous boil.

Then he turned his back on the worlie and made tigerish Monday plans for the infinitely fireable Terri-Louise.

As the golden blade descended, Ondain felt tears creep from the corners of her eyes. In vain.

And then there came from out of the enraged and ghastly sky a presaging gout of thunder. The herald of the Deluge.

And Clyde Braxi, Jr., waiting for the fireable Terri-Louise, who was going to be, after all, too sensible to come in on Monday, fell to thinking of Mars and Mercury, those deserts, and Venus awash with waters. And later, oddly, of the hole in the ozone layer.



"So what's this I hear about some incredible breakthrough!"

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Marina Fitch is a life-long Californian who has recently moved to Oregon. Her short fiction has appeared in Writers of the Future, Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine, *and* Pulphouse. *She has traveled all over Europe and has lived in Ireland, events which give her fiction a Celtic flavor. That flavor is present in "Jessica," Marina's first story for* F&SF.

Jessica

By Marina Fitch

IN THE DREAM the girl turned to Madeline and said, "Mommy." The child's brown eyes sparkled with a wisdom beyond her two years. "Jessica wants," the girl said. "Jessica wants to fly."

"We're going to have a girl," Madeline told Rick at breakfast, pushing aside her untouched eggs. The morning sun deepened the grain of the walnut table so that it glowed like the dream child's eyes.

Rick rested his hand on her rounded belly. "And how do you know?"

"I dreamed it. Her name is Jessica."

Rick scooted his chair closer to hers. He leaned over and nuzzled his cheek to her stomach. "Listen, Jessica, try not to make your mama so sick, O.K.?"

Madeline giggled, pushing him away. The scent of eggs and the ripple of laughter in her throat triggered her gag reflex. She stumbled from the

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table and ran down the hall to the bathroom, dropping to her knees in front of the toilet. As her body convulsed, she wondered what there could possibly be to come up. She'd spent several hours in this spot last night before crawling back to bed. She'd eaten nothing this morning. She squeezed her eyes shut as her body closed around the cramp like a fist.

The hurt subsided, and she straightened, conscious that Rick knelt beside her, pulling her hair away from her face. She wiped her mouth with a wad of toilet paper, then leaned backward against his chest. Bile stung the inside of her mouth. "In seven months," she said, "when this is over, can we get new carpet in here? I'm getting tired of this green stuff."

Rick held her close. "Anything. Listen, I think you should see the doctor again."

"I saw her last week when I spotted —"

"— and she did the ultrasound, and you heard the heartbeat. I know. I just can't believe this is all morning sickness."

"I'm an older woman —"

"Oooh, thirty-nine! You're such a crone!"

Madeline swatted him. Rick caught her hand and helped her to her feet, then to the bedroom. She lay down on the bed, resting her head against the pine headboard. Her gaze flickered over the Cassatt print of a mother and child before she turned toward the sliding glass door. From the bed, she could see the daffodils swaying along the edge of the backyard patio, bursts of yellow beneath the dark pines crowding the fence. Unlike the bathroom carpet, the familiarity of the daffodils soothed her. She stayed in bed most of the day, clutching the infant sleepers her friend Breda had given her.

That night, as Rick snored beside her, Madeline whispered to Jessica, hoping to calm the baby and relieve the cramp. She twisted with a deeper pain, her body folding in on itself, then straightened as the hurt lessened. With a moan, she turned to face the sliding glass door. The curtains framed the patio like the edges of a slide.

She froze. Fear sifted through her, the hair rising along her arms and neck in chill bumps. A woman stood on the patio, a flicker of a woman as translucent as celluloid, her body yearning toward Madeline with arms outstretched. The woman's eyes, two slits in a tear-swollen face, pleaded with Madeline. Then the woman's head rolled back, and she screamed, her voice a misery beyond anything Madeline could imagine.

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"Madeline!" Rick reached for her, pulling her to him. "What is it? Are you all right?"

Madeline broke away, turning to the glass door. The woman was gone. "It wasn't — I didn't scream. She did — there was a woman —"

"Honey, it's all right. You finally fell asleep; that's all."

"I didn't! She was there, on the patio!"

Rick released her and rose from the bed.

Madeline caught his arm. "Where are you going?"

"To find her."

Madeline tugged him to the bed. "She's not there. She wasn't real —"

"That scream was real."

Madeline clutched at him. "Please, just hold me."

He held her, stroking her hair until she fell asleep. She woke at sunrise in the careful circle of his arms.

They ate cold cereal for breakfast. "When do you see Dr. Gere?" Rick asked.

"Tomorrow."

Rick's lips pressed thin. "Ask her if there's anything you can take. Honey, you've got to get some sleep. And you've got to keep food down. This can't be good for you or the baby."

After he left, Madeline huddled beside the bed, twisting the sleepers into a knot. Nausea curdled through her. She rushed to the bathroom. When she stopped vomiting, she flushed the toilet, then sat with her back against the wall. A whiff of acid-soured milk clung to the air like stale perfume. She shuddered; pain radiated from her stomach to the tips of her fingers and toes. I'm dying, she thought. I must be dying.

Anger bubbled up in her. "I hate being pregnant; I hate this pain; I hate losing control of my body. Why am I doing this? What's the point?"

Then she remembered the dream and the perfect little girl. Calm warmed her. She and Rick had tried for so long to have a baby. For a while she thought she'd never conceive, that her body was too weak or too old or too — But here she was, pregnant, and if it took months of nausea and sleepless nights to hold her Jessica, it would be worth it.

Breda stopped by that afternoon. As they sat at the dining room table, Madeline shoved aside her gingham place mat and plate of dry toast. Breda inhaled the steam from a cup of tea. "Not easing up, is it?" Breda asked.

"No. Sometimes I think if I could just get away from the sickness by

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sleeping, I'd be able to cope with it better." Madeline sniffed. "I'm so tired, I'm having waking nightmares — you know, where you dream with your eyes open."

"So what did you dream?"

"I dreamed — I dreamed there was a woman crying on the patio. She reached for me, then she screamed. I guess *I* must have screamed. Somebody did. Rick woke up like a shot."

Breda pursed her lips. "And was she young or old?"

Madeline frowned. "I don't know."

"You're seeing Dr. Gere tomorrow? I'm going with you."

"I'd like that." Madeline reached across the table and squeezed Breda's arm. "Did I tell you it's going to be a girl?"

Madeline fell asleep before Rick finished washing the dinner dishes. A quiver of pain eddied through her when he got into bed, but she was too exhausted to rouse herself. Sometime after midnight her body spasmed awake. She lifted her head groggily and turned toward the glass door. Madeline's breath clenched at the sight of the crying woman.

The woman did not reach for her this time, but cradled her stomach. Breda's question hung in Madeline's mind: "Was she young or old?" Madeline got out of bed and went to the door.

Distorted by tears, the woman's face gave away nothing of her age. She might have been thirty, and she might as easily have been sixteen. Slight and waiflike, she balanced like a weed vibrating in a lull in the wind. Her breasts seemed unnaturally heavy above her sunken belly. Her head dropped back, and she wailed.

"Madeline!"

Madeline turned to Rick. She drew the curtains, knowing the woman had already gone. She said nothing as Rick led her back to bed.

"The woman was back last night," Madeline told Breda on the way to the doctor's. Madeline searched the plum trees that lined the avenue, as if the woman might peer out from the purple leaves. "I still couldn't tell how old she was."

"What did she look like?"

"She was small, and her breasts were swollen like she'd been nursing." Madeline knotted her hands in her lap. "Breda, I think she's a ghost."

"Did she scream again?"

"Yes."

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Breda crossed herself.

"What? Why did you do that?"

"We'll talk after you see the doctor." Breda pulled into the parking lot. "Any more dreams about Jessica?"

The visit with Dr. Gere had the tattered consistency of a lost memory. The examining room loomed impossibly white and empty, the metal examining table and chairs stark and shiny. Dr. Gere examined, ordered tests, talked hurriedly with her nurse, asked Madeline to sit in a chair. A pause filled the room. Then Dr. Gere told Madeline that the baby had died, possibly the day after they had listened to the heartbeat. Madeline sat still, her hands cupped in her lap. From the numbness, Madeline's words floated calmly: "Then why am I so sick?"

"I'm not sure," Dr. Gere said. "It probably has nothing to do with the baby. You may have a virus or an infection. But the baby is still inside you. We need to get it out."

"A D & C," Madeline told Breda in the car.

Breda put an arm around Madeline's shoulders. Neither said anything on the drive to Madeline's house. As they pulled into the driveway, Madeline turned Breda. "D & C," she said. "I can't even miscarry properly!"

And she began to cry.

Rick left work as soon as he got Breda's call. He ran into the house, flinging open the front door so that it crashed against the wall, rattling the vase on the entry table and leaving a circular dent in the plaster. A stillness gripped him when he saw Madeline. Later she remembered it not as a stillness born of calm, but one of rigid control.

He rocked her out of Breda's arms and into his own. He carried her to the living room sofa. He sat with his back against the padded armrest, pulling her into his lap.

At first she only cried, sobbing and wailing into his chest. Then she accused herself of not being woman enough to carry the baby, of not wanting Jessica enough. Rick stroked her hair. "Hey, where did you get these silly thoughts?"

Madeline pulled away. "They're not silly thoughts!" She crumpled against him. "They're not. I'm an unnatural mother. I hated being pregnant; I hated hurting all the time. I killed her by not wanting her enough."

Rick hugged her tighter. "Honey, it was a rough pregnancy. If you hadn't hated being sick, I'd have worried about you. You did not kill the baby."

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"No?"

"No. Maybe she was deformed or — or broken, and she just couldn't make it." Rick rested his cheek on her forehead. Madeline felt a tear trickle through her hair. "Maybe she was less than perfect."

"I could have — I could have accepted that."

"Could you? Well, maybe she couldn't."

Madeline stayed in bed until the D & C. She kept the curtains closed. The sight of the daffodils saddened and enraged her. Jessica would never see those flowers. She would never toddle toward them on thick, sturdy legs, hands reaching for the green stems. Jessica would never be.

Madeline hated the house. They would have to sell it, move to a city that had never held the promise of Jessica.

"Don't make any major decisions for at least a week after the D & C," Dr. Gere said. "Your emotions will be too extreme."

Rick took her to Mexico. When they got home, Madeline no longer wanted to sell the house. She contented herself with ripping up the green carpet in the bathroom. She gave her sister, Sally, back the box of hand-me-down baby clothes, but couldn't part with the infant sleepers Breda had given her. Those she buried in her socks-and-leotard drawer. She went barefoot or wore sandals as much as possible.

Rick kept his own anguish in check. He grasped her wrists when she swung her clenched hands in unfocused rage, and listened as she spoke haltingly of Jessica, his silence goading her to spin fantasies in which Jessica played with mud and colored blocks. Whenever Madeline asked how he felt, he turned the conversation back to her.

Then one evening while walking through Hollister Park, they passed a woman crouching before her son. The boy grasped the plastic seat of a swing, his gaze fixed on the sand at his feet. His mother held him by the opposite wrist, scolding in a whisper and jerking him forward. With a curse, she slapped him.

Rick's face reddened. He turned on the woman. "You have no right to touch a child like that!"

The woman glared at him, then stood and yanked her son away by the arm. Rick scowled. "Even jackasses can have children," he said. "It's not —"

Madeline touched his elbow. He put an arm around her shoulder and crumpled against her. He cried when they got home.

Even after the first month, the smallest thing broke Madeline. When

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the man came to collect for Greenpeace, his eyes were the brown of the dream Jessica's. An envelope arrived with the stamped message, "Save the Children." And then there were those moments when Madeline just hugged herself and rocked. She held herself together, her arms around her calves, her chin to her knees, and let the tears spill down her cheeks.

"It just wells up inside me and chokes me," she told her sister. She hugged a sofa cushion, pulling absently at the nap of the fabric while studying her sister's face.

Sally rolled her eyes. "Madeline, will you stop torturing yourself? You had a miscarriage. You go on."

"It hurts, Sally."

"Yes, but — Madeline, it wasn't even born."

"Sally. . . ."

"Look, you never even held it. It wasn't a baby yet."

Madeline's jaw tightened. She threw the cushion aside and stood. "Leave my house. Now."

"It hurts to see you dragging this out —"

"Leave. *Now*." Madeline strode to the front door and wrenched it open. "Before I say something I'll regret."

"And what would you have said?" Breda asked later.

Madeline trembled, pressing her palms flat against the kitchen table. "I wanted to tell her I hoped she'd lose one of the girls just so she'd know how I felt."

Breda pursed her lips. "Good thing she left."

Madeline shook her head. "Am I overreacting? Am I creating this pain?"

"Born or not, the baby was real. She was in you; she was wanted. That hope, that movement inside you, that was real. It was a death, Madeline."

THAT NIGHT, Madeline woke to the quiet rumble of Rick's snores. She shifted a little, trying to recapture sleep. A stripe of pale light shone between the curtains. "It's just that the moon is full," she recited softly, sliding out of bed. She padded to the sliding glass door and peered out.

The woman stood on the patio, her head listed to one side. Her gaze fastened on Madeline. Her arms rose slowly, reaching for Madeline, her chest heaving with an intake of breath. Madeline snatched the curtains closed.

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"You remember the woman I saw, before I found out I lost Jessica?" Madeline asked Breda the next day as they sipped tea in the kitchen. "You said we'd talk about it after I saw the doctor. Tell me about her now."

Breda set down her cup. "Madeline, calm down. What happened? Did you see her again?"

Madeline nodded.

Breda crossed herself. "And what did she do?"

"She reached for me."

"Dear God."

"Breda, what is it? What is she?"

Breda pursed her lips. "Have you ever heard of banshees?"

A shiver crept up Madeline's spine. She tilted her own cup and studied the green liquid. "They're ghosts, aren't they? They haunt a family just before somebody dies —"

"Some people say the banshee is the ghost of a woman who died in childbirth."

Madeline's chest constricted. The swollen, heavy breasts, the sunken belly — "My baby's dead. She came to tell me my baby was dead. What does she want now?"

Breda shook her head.

Madeline slammed her cup down. "What does she want *now*?"

"I don't know."

"Does she want Rick? Or me? Breda —"

"I don't know what she wants. Face her. Go to her."

Madeline laughed mirthlessly. "Confront her like a bad dream?"

"Yes, or you'll never know."

"But if she wants Rick —"

Breda gazed at her steadily. "If she wants either of you, there's nothing you can do."

As dusk deepened into night, Madeline paced beside the sliding glass door, peering out at the patio. She imagined it strewn with plastic horses and Frisbees, a ball nestling between the bloomless daffodils and the pines. Madeline bit down on her lip. She drew a J on the glass with her finger. Darkness spilled from the bedroom to the yard, filling the world with shadow.

The overhead light clicked on. Madeline started, stepping back from the glass door. The banshee's face, bloated from crying, stared back at her.

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Madeline shivered. Confront her, Madeline thought; find out. She reached for the glass, and stopped as the banshee raised an arm. Madeline backed away from her reflection.

Rick wound his arms around her from behind. "You O.K.?"

"Yes. Fine." She stroked his arms. "Rick, why can't I get over Jessica?"

"I don't know."

"Are you over her?"

"Not entirely."

"Do you still hurt when you see other children?"

"No."

"I do." Madeline wrapped his arms tighter around her. "I see her in them."

"Let go of her, Madeline. You've got to let go."

Madeline broke free of his embrace. "I don't know how."

That evening, Madeline lay awake, waiting for the banshee. The moon rose, lending color to the night: a cast of blue washed the pine trees, their shadows blackening the faint greens of the plants wherever they touched them. The patio itself was a pool of gray. Madeline rubbed her eyes. She blinked and sat up as the banshee stepped from the shadows.

Cautiously, Madeline slipped from the bed. The banshee swayed at the center of the patio, her shoulders hunched forward. Hair blew across the banshee's tear-streaked face as Madeline opened the door, stepping out onto the pebbled concrete. Madeline's breath caught at the tang of pitch and crushed pine needles; she exhaled slowly. The breeze touched her own cheek, cooled her damp skin. Sliding the door shut with only a slight clink, she turned to face the ghostly figure.

"What do you want?" Madeline said.

The banshee held out her arms to Madeline, then cradled nothing against her stomach.

Madeline sneered. "You've taken that. What more do you want?"

Again the banshee held out her arms to Madeline.

"Me? You want me? There's nothing left but a hole where my heart used to be. I have nothing to give Rick, nothing to give my friends but this pain. I have nothing to give *you*."

With a murmur the banshee closed her eyes.

"You know this pain, goddamn it," Madeline said. "You know it. What more do you want? My life? That would be a relief."

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The banshee threw back her head and keened.

A muffled shout snapped Madeline's attention to the house. In that insant the banshee vanished.

Rick fumbled the door open. He took her by the arm. "What the hell are you doing out here? Madeline, you've got to piece yourself back together. You can't mourn this baby forever."

Without a word, Madeline followed him inside. She crawled into bed, hugging the edge so that she wouldn't have to touch him. He put a hand on her shoulder, but withdrew it when she shrugged it off. After a while his breathing steadied, grew rhythmic with sleep. Madeline relaxed and finally dozed.

And she dreamed. Jessica came to her, brown eyes soft and sad. She was ten, maybe older, her little hands twisting the hem of her sweatshirt. "Mommy," she said, "Jessica wants to fly."

Madeline jerked awake. She curled up, balling her body around the ache and the last touch of the dream. "I know, baby," she said. "I know. But I don't know how to let go of you."

After Rick left for work, Madeline went to the bedroom and sat facing the sliding glass door. She thought about Jessica and wondered how to let go. It was so hard. The only memories she had were hope and sickness and — she smiled weakly — the green carpet. There had been no body to say good-bye to, no body to hold one last time. Had there been something, some part of Jessica she could touch and feel, would it have made it easier? Madeline got to her feet and went to the dresser.

The drawer stuck. She wrenched it open and stirred the socks and leotards until she found the infant sleepers. She held them to her cheek, kissed them, then took them to the kitchen. She pulled out a mailer, addressed it to her sister, and carefully slipped the baby clothes inside. Digging through the stamp drawer, she counted out a couple of dollars' worth of stamps, hoping that was enough.

She walked to the corner, her shoulder blades wincing together as she passed juniper hedges and picket fences, but no one stepped out of the shadows. When she reached the mailbox, she hesitated, her fingers clutching the handle. Finally she posted the package, but as the metal slot clanged shut, the hole in her heart expanded. She studied the sidewalk on the walk home.

Neither she nor Rick spoke much during dinner. They said even less

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afterward. Getting ready for bed was a relief. Madeline curled up on her side facing the window.

She dozed and woke, dozed again. She woke with a twitch at one point and sat up suddenly, holding her breath as light streamed through the glass door. She breathed out. The moon; it was only the moon. She rose and went outside to meet the banshee.

Again the banshee held out her arms to Madeline.

"I don't know what you want," Madeline said. "You don't want me or Rick. We'd be dead if you did. I don't know what you want. Tell me."

The banshee's arms dropped. She hesitated, then placed both hands over her heart. She offered her crossed hands to Madeline.

"Yes," Madeline said. "The same pain. The same —" Madeline stopped. "And we both want the same peace. . . ."

The banshee nodded. Her eyes pleaded with Madeline.

"I can't offer you peace," Madeline said. "I wish I could, but I don't know how to make peace with myself. I don't know how to let go of my baby. I never got to hold her or say good-bye."

The banshee's hunched shoulders straightened. A weird light gleamed in her eyes as she walked toward Madeline.

Madeline stiffened. Don't touch me, she thought. Don't touch me or try to hold me or comfort me. "What do you want?" she said.

The banshee gazed at her. All the pain, all the despair that had eaten to the core of Madeline in the past weeks echoed in the banshee's eyes.

Madeline drew back. "You came for Jessica, didn't you? You knew she was dead, and you came to claim her for your own. But you can't have her because I won't let go of her. God, I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

The banshee took a deep, shuddering breath, then reached for Madeline again. Her hands, cold and searching, traced Madeline's sides, then cupped her stomach. Madeline winced as the banshee's fingers dug into her flesh, groping and pulling at the soft, weak muscle. Biting down on her lip, Madeline pressed her eyes shut. Those chill, probing fingers seemed to pierce her skin. She doubled over, knotted with pain.

The pain changed. She opened her eyes. The banshee stood before her, a baby cradled in her arms. Madeline trembled uncontrollably. Her chest resonated with an ache so sharp and so complete, she had to hold herself to keep from collapsing.

She winced, then glared at the banshee. "You've got what you want —

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why don't you just get the hell out of here? Leave me alone, you bitch!"

Then she looked down at the baby. The child began to fade, losing weight and shape in the banshee's arms. The banshee's face twisted with renewed grief. She offered the baby to Madeline.

Madeline hesitated, then took the baby. The child squirmed a little, her arms and legs wriggling. As if drawn into focus, she ceased to fade, her weight reassuring in Madeline's arms. But her skin was cold, so cold. Her eyes gazed up at Madeline with a plea, tears of blood caught in the tiny lashes.

"You wanted to fly," Madeline said, holding her close. "But I wouldn't let you. God, how I wanted you. Good-bye, Jessica."

Madeline kissed the baby's icy brow, then handed her to the banshee. The banshee cradled Jessica, bending over the little face. An ember of peace fanned to life inside Madeline, fed by the rebirth of hope.

The banshee raised her head and smiled. She and the baby disappeared.

"Take care of my Jessica," Madeline whispered.

"It smells like a carrot."

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The mythology of another country also touches Ray Aldridge's "Winedark." The story is set off the coast of Greece, and that country's ancient and sometimes terrible beauty flavors each line. Ray's story "The Gate of Faces," from our April 1991 issue, was a finalist for this year's Nebula Award. His novel series for Bantam will conclude with The Orpheus Machine.

Winedark

By Ray Aldridge

I like best the wine drunk at the cost of others.

— Diogenes the Cynic, 380 B.C.

I WISH I were a cynic, too.

I'm sailing my tired old boat back to Mykonos by myself; the crew quit in Santorin. The cook was already gone. Fortunately, it's the end of the charter season.

The crew was a college boy from Indiana. A degree in animal husbandry, he told me. Took a year off to see the world, before he returns to get his degree in advanced cow-kicking.

Anyway, he said he couldn't take it anymore. I asked him what "it" was, exactly.

"You're not lovable, Bradley," he told me, with a look of unbecoming relish on his healthy young face. "You think you're better than you are. Maybe you

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were worth a shit, a long time ago, before you drank yourself into the vegetable kingdom—though I never heard of those books you claim to have written. But now you're just a fat old drunk, playing Cap'n Bligh." He shook his head. "The drunker you get, the meaner you get—you know that? And I've never seen you without a glass to hand, have I?"

I set my glass carefully on the cockpit table, but I didn't get up. I could see in his eyes that he wanted me to, and he was a big, strong cow-kicker.

"Just pay me off," he said.

I laughed—with an effort, I'll admit. But then his hand twitched toward a winch handle that lay on the table, and I got scared. It's hard to be a principled coward, though a man should try.

So I paid him off, and in the twilight he went away down the jetty, without a backward glance. Beyond him the wall of the caldera rose up, in a thousand corroded colors. Up to the ghost-haunted heights of Thera. Where Byron probably still parties down every night, dancing in the Yellow Donkey with the tourists. In disguise.

I'm sorry. I can't help seeing things in this stupid, melodramatic way; I'm a trained observer. It's a cross to bear.

Anyway, I don't believe I'm such a tyrant. It's important to maintain discipline aboard a sailing vessel. One Captain under God, and all that. Boat's can't be democratic. Kids don't understand; out on the sea, the cavalry won't come. It's up to you to save your own butt.

No, No. I think the boy found one of those smoky young Swedish girls, up the hill at the Atlantis Hotel. I can't say I blame him, if so. Those girls . . . they're as much a part of the islands as the ruined temples and the gullied hills; everywhere their bright heads shine in the Greek dazzle. Slim brown legs, taut northern breasts, good cheekbones, wide blue eyes. Astonishingly gullible—or maybe they just don't care if you lie to them, because they're going home next week. Hard to resist, when you're young and dumb.

Hell, I was a lot older and smarter than the cow-kicker when I ran out of charm and had to give them up.

So I'm sailing *Olympias* back by myself. She's a sweet old witch, though, and no trouble. Right now we're jogging along under staysail and mizzen, the main lowered and lashed down.

The night wind is booming over the starboard quarter, fine for going home. So I shouldn't complain . . . but the wind worries me a little. The Piraeus weather broadcast said nothing about such a frisky breeze down here tonight.

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Well, they guess wrong, most of the time. Little squirrelly depressions swirl up out of nothing, and crash through the rocks and islets, completely unpredictable. Gone the next day, vanished into the white Aegean sunshine. Meterological pinball.

Sometimes these ghost winds can be evil; ask Odysseus.

Anyway, I'm somewhat concerned. Time for another ouzo, then. I fish the bottle out of the rack under the cockpit table and pour a half-tumbler out. If I sip frugally, and the boat's motion gets no worse, the drink will last me to midnight.

I love this table; it was one of my cleverest ideas. The cheap Greek wines are often drinkable, but shake them around a little, and they turn to vinegar overnight. The original table was gimballed, with a box full of lead for a counterweight. I took out the lead and built pigeonholes for a dozen bottles, and now my wine lasts long enough for me to drink it. That's what matters.

Achilles the wind vane steers us, doing a better job than I could, even if I were sober. I call the contraption Achilles because I replaced the vane's original white sail with a garishly tie-dyed pink-and-yellow fabric. I got it in Crete from an ancient beached hippie. Achilles was a bit of a transvestite. I always explain this little joke to the charterers, and they always smile tentatively and then laugh in that way people laugh when they're humoring a geek. Maybe I don't tell jokes very well; maybe humor isn't my forte. Sometimes I tell them how my ex-wife used to call me Achilles because, she said, I was a vulnerable heel. I want them to disagree, but they don't, usually.

Well, who cares? Not me. This wind . . . it's picking up a little. Now I can occasionally hear the sibilant whisper of breaking crests. The darkness is too thick to see much, which is just as well, I suppose. If I could see the waves, I might be scared.

Olympias jolts, hit by an unexpected cross sea, and I spill my drink. I curse, unheard by anyone but the ghosts, and start to pour another one.

But then some remnant of caution stays me, and I settle for a glass of retsina. I've never really liked the paint-thinner taste of retsina, so that's what I drink whenever I don't want to get too drunk too fast. When I still had friends, they would laugh at the logic of this tactic, but what's wrong with it?

Whatever works; that's my motto.

My friends, the better ones, sometimes talked to me about the drinking. They seemed to think there was such a thing as "quitting." I don't understand that. Sure, I'm a drunk. I know it. But the glory of humanity is its adaptability.

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I've adapted to the passage of the poisonous molecules over my brain—it would kill me to stop, as surely as it would kill me to reenter the ancestral sea and try to breathe water. I've made an irreversible adaptation. Maybe it's true that the stuff is slowly killing me, but I can't tell. Somewhere I have a little collection of articles clipped from American magazines. The articles are about folks with large pieces of their brains missing, excised after a bullet or a steering wheel or a cancer had violated their skulls.

And they've recovered; they're leading normal lives. No one knows unless they tell. I used to show these to my friends and laugh and fill another glass

I haven't had occasion to display the clippings in some time, but I'm sure they're still aboard, somewhere.

Spray is beginning to wet the decks. I can taste the salt on my lips. The crests are starting to thunder, an ugly sound. I still think this is just a little crippled sirocco, blowing dust and ghosts up from North Africa.

I don't know why I'm always nattering on about ghosts. I don't believe in the poor, sad creatures at all . . . but I can't help thinking about them. This is such a haunted part of the world. So many generations have struggled to die here, but I don't think that's the cause. Not the antiquity alone, not just the unimaginable quantities of bones that layer the islands and the sea bottom. No, there've been so many atrocities, massacres, betrayals. So much agony—the sort of thing that breeds ghosts from the ordinarily serene release of death. Or so believers tell me.

For some reason, lurching through the noisy darkness, I remember a little story told me by a Greek caïque captain, some years ago. I was waiting in Corfu for a party of young German charterers—the worst possible fate for a Med charter yacht, short of shipwreck or seizure, let me assure you—and struck up an acquaintance with Demetrios, who was a Cretan smuggler.

We were sitting in the waist of his caïque, over the remnants of his lamb and my ouzo. He was cleaning his revolver, a huge, ancient Webley. He smuggled whatever was profitable: hashish, antiquities. White slaves, for all I knew. I can't imagine what he was doing in Corfu. It never occurred to me to ask, though I was curious.

"So you don't believe in ghosts, eh?" Demetrios squinted through the barrel of the Webley, holding it aloft to catch the light of the westering sun. The Greeks all look as though they've been hired by a brilliant casting director. Demetrios was no exception. Bearded black curls under a black cap, white teeth, weather-darkened skin, a barrel chest, surprisingly beautiful eyes.

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"No," I said.

"Perhaps it is as well, so," he said. "Perhaps your skepticism protects you. Who can say?" But I thought I heard a tincture of pity in his words, which annoyed me a little.

"And you? Do you believe?"

He laughed. "I am Greek."

"Is there a better reason?" My annoyance caused me to speak in a slightly jeering tone, which I instantly regretted, for Demetrios scowled and snapped the Webley closed.

"Many reasons, yes," he said darkly, giving me a suddenly unfriendly glance.

I was more than a little afraid; to cover my confusion, I refilled our glasses with the last of the ouzo. It's surprising how many of life's difficulties, small and large, can be managed in this fashion.

It worked yet again. In Greece, you must toast the man who gives you a drink. To do otherwise would be unforgiveably rude, and though Demetrios was a bloody-handed criminal, his manners were flawless.

He raised his glass to me, and said, "Would you like to hear about the time I met the sea nymph?"

"Yes, please," I said, with no trace of condescension now. Writers should never miss an opportunity to gather material, and so I never do, though it hasn't brought me any notable success.

"All right, then." He settled back against the bulwark and put his revolver aside.

"A FEW YEARS ago it was," he said. "Where I had been, what I had done . . . these things don't matter. This much I tell you: blood still stained my boat's hull. She looked as rusty as your old tub — but it was the blood of men, not the blood of steel."

I was somewhat offended by this criticism of *Olympias*, but he went on, already lost in vivid memory, beyond paying any attention to me.

"I was alone, the only survivor. Unfitting, unfitting; a capain who loses his men and keeps his own life must have great shame. Great shame. It was night, and the mistral screamed in my ears, a killing wind. It wrenched at my boat's bones, so that she was never the same again, and I had to give her to the shipbreakers." He looked sad, perhaps more genuinely so than at the memory of his lost crew.

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"My despair then was as deep as the sea. I think that's important; I think that she comes only to men who feel no hope; I think that she offers a kind of redemption, a final grace."

"'She?"

"The ghost, the sea nymph. Or goddess. Or demon. Who knows? Still, this is my theory: she comes only to those who despair. Other men have seen her, men who claim not to have despaired, but men lie. Who knows what cankers can lie in the stranger's heart?

"I was a mad man, for the space of a few hours. I cried; I screamed; I raved —I called out the names of my friends, as if they could hear, rotting in the ditch where the Turk dumped them.

"She came when I was almost blind with tears and the salty knives of the spray, when the boat had become almost unmanageable, when we were a heartbeat away from broaching and rolling under.

"I was as good as dead.

"But in the blackness came a light, a soft golden light, as strange as sunlight at midnight. And the waves slowed . . . and then grew still. The sea looked like one of those bad paintings the English tourists love to buy, *The Tempest* or *The Shipwreck*, with the waves rearing up like frozen taffy, soaked through with a green glow."

He looked at me angrily, as if he expected me to be insultingly skeptical, but I wore my Observer face, a bland, attentive mask.

"I thought I was mad for certain then; I thought perhaps we had already gone deep, and this was some death dream, filling my brain in the crevice between living and dying. Maybe we were drifting downward through the quiet, all done.

"Then she came, as though she had stepped from a door in the sea. She stood there on one of those frozen waves, as close to me as I am to you."

"You called her a goddess," I said. "Was she beautiful?"

He gave me a look of cool amusement. "Tell me," he said. "Do you find our islands beautiful?" And he made a sweeping, eloquent gesture that somehow indicated the summer sea, with its crop of lovely, sterile rock piles.

"Yes, of course," I answered.

"Then she was beautiful." He leaned toward me and dropped his voice to a hoarse whisper. "She looked at me with eyes so crazy that I gave up my pretext of madness, ashamed again. And then she spoke, in a voice like a

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lost child. Do you know what she said?"

I shook my head.

"She said, 'Where is Alexander the Great? Where is he?' She spoke with all the confusion of an old person who has forgotten his name, or a baby who has yet to learn his."

"What did you do?"

His shoulders slumped slightly. "I discovered that my despair was not so deep as I had imagined . . . so I answered as one who fears to die must. I said, 'Great Alexander lives and rules.'"

A silence fell, and the sun sank into waves beyond the harbor mole.

Finally I spoke. "And if you had not answered so?"

"Then she would have given me the swift, painless death I thought I craved."

"And then? What happened next?"

His face seemed oddly naked, for such a hard, secretive man. "She smiled at me, as sweetly as an infant. Then she went away, like a blown-out candle. The sea regained its strength, but only for a few minutes. The mistral eased, and I lived . . . to tell you this tale."

I know that I envied Demetrios his memory — for it was clear he believed his story, that it had for him a significance deeper than any I can imagine. I envy everyone who does not live the synthetic life I live, always removed from the intensity of the moment by my crippled writer's observance. Always I wonder how best to record what I see, what I feel, what I do — and neglect to see, to feel, to do.

My affair with the sea is a failure of a different sort. When I was very young, I read about the sea with the same starry-eyed fervor that other children read about cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers. As a young man, I continued this long-distance romance; I lived in an inland city, far from any reality that might injure my illusions. I read all the great sailing chronicles: Voss, Slocum, Gerbault, the Smeetons, the Hiscocks, Robinson, Chichester, Barton, Allcard, Villiers . . . the names roll off the tongue sweetly, and they all mean freedom, the excitement of faraway lands and people, self-reliance, adventure, the crunch of the bow wave, the spicy smell of the island. All good things, of course. I don't deny it, even now.

Anyway, tonight, plunging through the sea in a strengthening gale, I think particularly of Bernard Moitessier, that magnificent eccentric. The

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sea is Moitessier's religion, and his books are full of overwrought spiritual mania, though they are far more readable than the books of other French seamen, who seem for the most part to be so afflicted with hysterical Gallic chauvinism as to become caricatures of men, walking, talking tricolors.

However, Moitessier's devotion to the sea now seems to me utterly irrational. He sailed in the first single-handed, round-the-world, nonstop race. His steel ketch *Joshua* was the fastest boat in the race, and he was well ahead of the others, almost to the finish line, when he decided that all the months he had already spent alone at sea were not enough. He dipped back down into the high southern latitudes and rounded the Cape of Good Hope again, sailed through the Indian Ocean and into the Pacific, and didn't drop anchor until he reached Tahiti.

And then, to compound this strangeness, he wrote a book about the voyage and donated the royalties to the pope. To save the earth.

Anyway, when I think of Moitessier's rapturous descriptions, and how he wrote of joyously sailing through the storms, I can't decide whether to laugh or cry.

When I sold my first book, my publisher, guilty perhaps of wishful thinking, paid a foolishly optimistic advance.

I took the money to Annapolis, where I bought my first boat. Before that, the only sailing I had done was in friends' boats on the lake. Gentle breezes, placid water.

I can still remember how shocked I was when, for the first time, I took my sailboat out into the Atlantic. How frightened.

The air was light when we left the jetty, but it soon freshened, and by midafternoon, it was blowing twenty knots across six-foot seas. Nothing, really, just a fresh breeze. It's blowing twice as hard tonight. But I realized, with a certainty that has never left me, just how mindlessly malevolent the sea is, how much it craves the lives of the puny air-breathers who venture out on it.

When we came back in, I tied the boat to the dock and didn't move her again for six weeks. By that time I had convinced myself that my initial reaction was just an aberration, that I would soon get over my fright and begin to see the same beauty and feel the same joy that my heroes wrote of.

But I never have.

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Why do I keep trying? Because . . . because sailing is the only real thing I've ever done. No matter how frightened I am—and I'm sick with fear and ouzo right now—I can still define myself as a seaman. As an adventurer, a voyager, a striver against the elements. Otherwise I'm just an aging, failed writer, a drunk, alone.

What would I do, if I could ever find some fool to buy *Olympias*? When I try to imagine, I see myself, even older and fatter and more decayed, vegetating at some Podunk junior college, resting on my meager laurels, teaching pimply-faced adolescents to write brainless essays, fucking the occasional presentable coed.

I may, of course, be assuming too much, to think that even junior-college coeds would be stupid enough to be dazzled by my small frame and worn-out charm.

Or perhaps I might get a job writing guidebooks.

I WASN'T ALWAYS so pitiful. I remember, a long time ago, a wharf at Piraeus.

That was the day I met my ex-wife.

I was still young enough to believe that I would one day become a good writer, despite the poor sales and the unkindness of the critics. And I had learned to pretend fearlessness, sometimes so well that I fooled myself. I drank for joy, not for anesthesia . . . or at least that was the theory.

I was splicing a bucket lanyard, sitting on the side deck, legs dangling, a cup of new red wine beside me.

I put a whipping around the rope end, separated the strands, concentrated on the work—but I gradually became aware of a pair of strong, bare legs on the wharf. My attention traveled up, to round hips in tight white shorts, to a smooth, bare belly, to small, perfect breasts in a translucent halter top.

She had a narrow, pretty face, noteworthy mainly for the clarity and directness of her gaze. Shiny brown hair. A long, graceful neck. She seemed a little older than the usual dock bunny; a few interesting laugh lines framed those luminous eyes. She was a beautiful woman, not a pretty one.

"So what are you doing?" she asked, in pleasant Midwest English.

"Making an eye splice," I said. I was holding one of the strands in the flame of a lighter, melting the end so it wouldn't unravel. I clicked off the

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lighter, dipped my fingers into the wine, and then rolled the melted nylon into a point between my wet fingers. It hissed and stuck to my skin, burning me.

I shook my hand and muttered a curse. She laughed, without any meanness. "What happened?"

"A minor wound," I said, noticing what a nice smile she had. "Usually I just spit on my fingers. But I didn't want to be indelicate."

She stopped smiling and looked at me with that always-recognizable intensity, that sweet, flesh-calling-to-flesh energy. "Go on," she said, licking her lips with a pointed pink tongue. "Use spit; I won't mind."

We had a good run, Lissa and I. We did. Finally she left me, after eight wonderful and awful years. For a rich Dutchman with a big Swan, a beautiful boat indeed. But I'll never believe it was because he had a better boat than mine, or more money, or that he was still strong, while I . . . I had already earned this bloated drunkard's face, that now so perfectly masks what I once thought myself to be.

No. She was too fine a person, a woman of grace and compassion. Far too good for me.

No, I think she could not bear to see me sink. She never said as much; I think she wanted to hide her pity from me, a last act of kindness.

I haven't seen her for years. She and the Dutchman swallowed the anchor and moved back to his big tulip farm. It's funny. For months at a time, I avoid thinking about her, and then something will happen. Just last week, someone who knew us in the good days told me that she has a little boy now, just three years old.

I don't know why that bit of irrelevant information affected me so; I was almost in tears. I don't know why. Yes, I do.

I think maybe I didn't switch to the retsina soon enough. I should be trying to do something to ease *Olympias*, but here I sit in her weather-beaten cockpit, blubbering over my decayed memories. We jolt into huge black waves, the sea so angry, so loud that I no longer hear the boat's voice—the commonplace, reassuring creaks and grinds and clatters of an old steel boat. Spray bursts high to windward, hanging in the green glow of the sidelight, and solid water courses along the lee decks. I'm soaked and shivering; it's too bad I was too drunk to get my oilskins early enough to do any good.

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The masts are whipping like trees in the gale; she's carrying far too much canvas for this weight of wind.

I should be terrified; in fact, I should be even more terrified that I'm not as afraid as any rational person would be, but I continue to wrap myself in old hurts, safe in my regrets.

What the hell. Time for some terminal anesthesia. I throw away the retsina that remains in my glass, and grope for the ouzo bottle. It's no easy business—the gimballed table is snap-rolling in the violent seaway, and I risk a broken wrist.

Long practice sees me through, however, and I get the bottle out. Then tragedy strikes, and I lose the bottle; it slips through my wet hand and shatters on the cockpit floor.

I think that was my last bottle of ouzo, and it's not the sort of night that wine will serve. I don't know what to do.

While I still sit here, stunned by my loss, a big wave breaks onboard. The staysail catches the top of it and rips from luff to leech, a sound like a pistol shot. In a moment the sail dissolves into whipping tatters, and suddenly Achilles can no longer cope with the unbalanced rig. *Olympias* slews off downwind, and I clutch at the wheel.

The contact with *Olympias* restores a little of my perspective, though I'm still miraculously unafraid. The wheel throbs in my hands, as if *Olympias* were shuddering at some fearful thing only she could see. Abruptly, I remember the jagged rocks that line the leeward edge of this channel.

"Perfect," I say, though the wind whips away the word before it can travel the tiny distance between my mouth and my ear.

I can feel *Olympias* sliding across the sea, wallowing in the troughs, balanced precariously on the crests, moving toward her grave among the sharp rocks. When it occurs to me that it will be my grave also, I feel nothing but a great surprise.

Did I see her then, the goddess or demon, the lost one who moans in bewilderment for Great Alexander? Did she come to me, drawn by my numbness and defeat?

Did I see her ravaged face, with the black skin peeling back from the bone, a dead, dry thing in dusty rags, standing in a grotto of motionless, jagged water? Did I hear her pitiful question, in the sudden silence?

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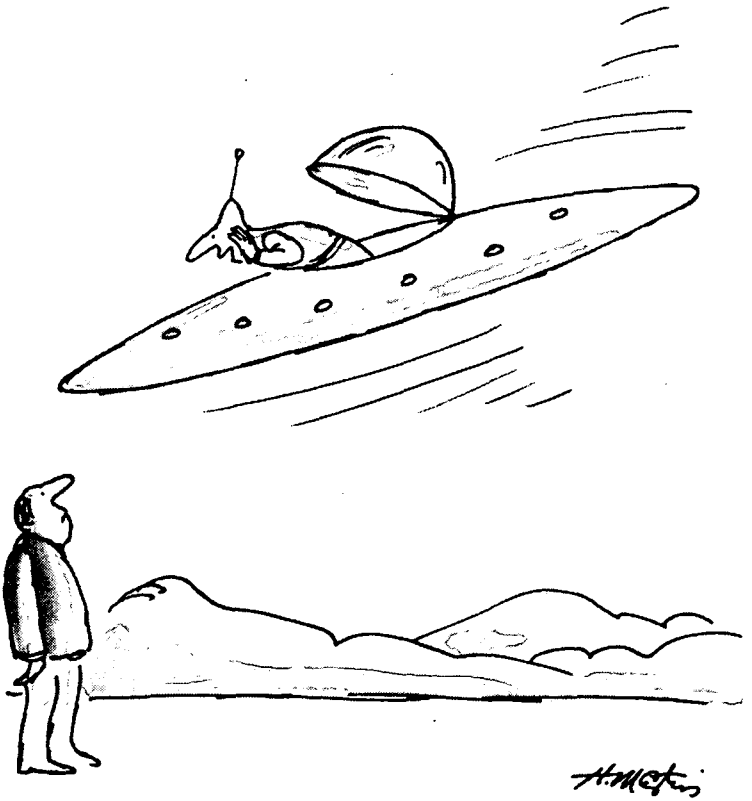
I don't know; I don't know. I'm afraid to know. But I do know that I answered her, shrieking as if the wind still raged.

Olympias threaded her way through the rocks, miraculously. Was that the doing of the lost one? Because I gave her the right answer?

I don't know. And today, as I work in the autumnal sun, chipping rust from my boat, I ply the iron in a frenzy, like a man chipping rust from his own soul.

I think this: there are worse fates than mine, even if I never become more than a fat old drunk who writes guidebooks.



"A meteor is coming! A meteor is coming!"

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We end as we began, with an exotic story set in the far east. Marc Laidlaw last appeared in F&SF with an odd science fiction story in our anniversary issue. Since then, he has sold a novel, Kalifornia, *to St. Martin's Press. Tibet, the setting for "The Vulture Maiden," has been a constant love for Marc. It was the setting of his novel,* Neon Lotus, *published by Bantam in 1988. "The Vulture Maiden" is, in Marc's words, "based on the most current information I've been able to obtain about the situation inside Tibet today, although the fantasy element of a story like this one must necessarily soften the incredible horror of the political situation, by holding out a hope that so far is nowhere to be seen except in the hearts of the Tibetans, both those remaining under Chinese communist rule, and the many in exile. In that sense, this is pure escapism, and the Vulture goddess is my own invention — my wish for the deliverance of the Tibetan people."*

THE VULTURE MAIDEN

By Marc Laidlaw

With the development of our socialist system, the social system for the natural extinction of religion was established.

— Ganze Prefecture Policy on Religious Freedom *Chapter 5, Section 1: "Freedom of Religious Beliefs is a Long-Term Policy That Will Prevail Until the Natural Extinction of Religion."*

I.

THE SPRING FESTIVAL BEgan at sunrise with the roar of a giant *kangling* carried by two monks and blown by a barrel-chested third who stood on the highest wall of the Shining Hill monastery's central temple. Golden light, like the voice of the horn made visible, lanced into the gray shadows that covered the broad valley as the sun peered through a notch between

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distant peaks capped with violet snow. Frost evaporated from the tufted brownish grasses, mingling with low, icy vapors that made the sky seem to shimmer like a silken tapestry. In the hall below, the crashing of cymbals rose to overpower the *kangling*'s dying wail, and then came the low, deep-throated chanting of the monks. The rocky hill behind the monastery began to glow with a warm, honeyed light.

As the monks turned away from the sun and toward Shining Hill, carrying their immense horn back into the building, the sunlight touched a plume of dust rising from the road to the monastery. Along that road, from the direction of the nearby village, a convoy of six trucks drummed and rattled. Ahead of them walked a long procession of villagers bearing scarves and wildflowers, sacks of nuts and grain and other offerings. The trucks sounded their horns, scarcely slowing as they approached the crowd; villagers scattered quickly, pulling each other out of the way, shouting warnings to those ahead. They moved to the roadside and glowered at the passing vehicles, saying nothing, not daring to curse the drivers because they knew that such words hung in the air and joined with other unwise things they might have uttered in a moment of despair, and eventually ended up in an official's file so that one day the speaker might be summoned to a brief "interview" and never be seen again in the village. This was even more likely now that the *ledhon rukhag*, or "work gang" — whose trucks these were — had been dispatched to the village.

The trucks reached the Shining Hill monastery just as the hill began to lose some of its legendary luster. They parked on the rutted earth before the main building. When the engines died, the sound of chanting filled the silence. High-pitched bells were ringing and pure songbowls singing, their weird wavering notes as piercing as the thin air that scoured Zhogmi Chhodak's nostrils, threatening him with yet another nosebleed, when he opened his door and stepped down from the first truck. This was spring? His feet were numb despite the heavy boots and thick woolen socks he had brought from Beijing; a shock of cold passed through his soles and up his legs, as if the very earth were trying to stab him, as if the elements of the Tibetan Autonomous Region harbored an irrational enmity and would strike him down if they could.

Full of regret at leaving the warmth of the heated cab, he surveyed the grounds of Shining Hill. The local Democratic Management Committee had promised to meet his work gang on the steps of the main building, but

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there was no sign of them. The compound was sorry-looking, half-finished, no better than some prisons he had toured, despite all the money the monks had requested for restoration so that Shining Hill might attract a tourist trade. That was no longer a priority, however. Tourists had brought welcome money into the TAR, but too many other contaminants traveled with them, diseases for which no inoculant existed other than total isolation. Capitalism was a greater scourge than the bitter winds that swept the high Tibetan plateau. Under the current protection of martial law, Zhogmi could act without caring how the propagandists of the Dalai clique would interpret his actions. He had a sort of freedom here.

Zhogmi Chhodak could not imagine a more isolated place. He longed for the busy streets of Beijing, the cultural center of the world. He shared a common ancestry with the villagers, but nothing else. The Party offered incentives to mainland Chinese who moved to Tibet, but so far there had been few migrants to this region. In Lhasa and some other parts of the TAR, the indigenous population was outnumbered more than ten to one by immigrants; would that it were so here. The villagers were a primitive, superstitious people. The shame they caused Zhogmi sharpened his determination to bring them forward, though still he cursed his Tibetan blood, which had landed him in this remote outpost. One could almost imagine that the Revolution had never reached this spot — except that the rubble of the monastery still showed the marks of mortar shelling, and the hill was in places torn by craters made when he was a boy.

The chanting in the temple continued unabated, and the villagers on the road were nearer. Zhogmi's men stood shivering in their coats, stamping on the hard dirt, blowing on their hands. His driver had gone around a corner of the temple to urinate, so Zhogmi opened the driver's door and bleated the horn. It sounded feeble after the *kangling*'s roar, and had no apparent effect on the ritual. Nonetheless, within seconds there was a stir inside the temple entrance, and four men hurried down the steps to greet the trucks.

"Zhogmi! Welcome!" said a broadly smiling man, speaking in a hushed voice, as if not wishing to impinge on the sounds coming from the hall. Jowo Tenzin was Tibetan, paunchy and balding, and dressed very inappropriately in a native *chuba* that did little to disguise his bulk. As leader of the Democratic Management Committee, that agency which

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oversaw the functioning of the monastery, Tenzin was responsible for enforcing the policies of the Nationalities and Religious Affairs Bureau Commission. He seized Zhogmi's hand and shoulder, bringing him up the steps toward the entrance. The other three DMC members, dressed more suitably in the khaki or dark-blue uniforms of the Republic, greeted Zhogmi more cautiously.

"The seasonal ceremonies are just begining," Tenzin said breathlessly. "If you wish to see —"

"I have no desire to see misguided displays of superstition." Zhogmi pulled from Tenzin's grasp and took a stand on the topmost step, just outside the temple entrance. He could smell a rancid burning odor and a perfume of incense. "Nor should you indulge in such behavior."

"Indulge? I don't encourage a thing — I merely permit what the law allows."

The youngest DMC member, a Chinese man named Jing Meng-Chen, moved closer. "We monitor the ceremonies only to ensure their legitimacy. It is all too easy to subvert the rites with irrelevant commentary disguising a political purpose."

Zhogmi nodded his approval, and waited to see if Tenzin agreed. Jing Meng-Chen clearly would have been a sensible choice to head the DMC, but it was not uncommon to secure the sympathy of locals by entrusting some authority to a malleable Tibetan. Such flexibility, inevitably, also played a part in counterrevolutionary conduct. Since Jing Meng-Chen did not seem the sort to compromise principles for the sake of personal gain, Zhogmi decided that he was the man to carry out his bidding.

"I appreciate your devotion," he told Jing Meng-Chen. "However, further observation will not be necessary this morning."

"That's fine," Jowo Tenzin said happily. "They are a trustworthy lot."

"On the contrary," Zhogmi said, and watched sharp creases suddenly divide Tenzin's broad brow. "The ritual will be stopped immediately."

"But . . . but really!" Tenzin protested. "That's quite illegal."

"Not under the circumstances," Zhogmi said.

He saw that Jing Meng-Chen did not question his command, and in fact seemed ready to carry it out. "Put an end to that racket," Zhogmi told him.

"Yes, sir."

"And take some of my men along if you think you'll need help."

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Jing Meng-Chen glanced at the machine guns in the hands of the work team.

"That won't be necessary, sir."

"Nonetheless — it's best for efficiency." He signaled several men toward the temple.

"Appreciated, sir," said Jing Meng-Chen. He turned back into the temple, followed by several soldiers of the work team. The other two DMC men also went inside, though Jowo Tenzin remained on the steps exhorting Zhogmi for an explanation.

"Last night I reviewed the monastery's accounts, Jowo Tenzin, and I found much to trouble me. Government grants have apparently vanished; huge amounts were withdrawn to make purchases for which no invoices appear; and there are numerous unauthorized expenditures. Unless and until you can explain each of these discrepancies, I am seizing the monastery's assets. No money shall be withdrawn from the monastic account either by monks or the DMC."

"But — but there are day-to-day requirements. The monks must eat."

"They shall earn a useful living doing necessary public works, as they should have been all along, instead of wasting resources on this ruin. What tourist would visit Shining Hill? It has no historic significance."

"To the villagers —"

"Would you encourage nostalgia for the old days of feudal oppression? Buddhism itself teaches the danger of attachment to illusion and material things."

Jowo Tenzin's stricken look told Zhogmi that he had made the right first move in stanching further waste and uncovering deceit.

"What do you know of Buddhism?" Tenzin whispered.

"I have served in the Tibetan Buddhist Guidance Committee and the Tibetan Buddhist Association."

Zhogmi had been aware for some time of the approach of the villagers. They stopped at the yard before the temple and anxiously looked toward the entrance. The presence of the work gang discouraged them. Zhogmi's men faced the growing crowd, guns at the ready. They had seen such crowds before, and the villagers had seen such men. No one wished to move. But the day was warming, the hampering ice in Zhogmi's joints beginning to thaw. The sky shimmered like silk, like a *thangka* painted in unreal colors.

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In the temple the monks fell silent.

Jowo Tenzin said quietly, "Perhaps if . . . if you waited until later, after the ceremony, it would benefit your plans. Many of them have brought offerings that might make up for the debts —"

"This monastery is not permitted to tax or take donations from the people," Zhogmi said sharply. "They already struggle to live with what they have. You dare not encourage religious parasites!"

"I only —"

At that instant, someone inside the temple let out a cry, scarcely muffled by the stone walls. A burst of gunfire answered it. Bullets must have ricocheted from the ceremonial bells and bowls, for a hideous metallic, many-voiced music followed the sound of the guns. This fractured wailing was drowned out by the screams of the villagers, who in that instant rushed the trucks and crowded toward the temple steps.

Zhogmi's gun was already in his hand, but the size of the mob startled him. He sprang back into the entryway while other men of his team ran forward to defend it. Broad pillars inside the door offered excellent cover while they fired down into the crowd. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jowo Tenzin dash down a side corridor; other monks rushed about, trying to find cover. He squeezed off several shots over the heads of the villagers, who, after their initial indignant charge, had realized the futility of their position and begun falling back behind the trucks. Most were already running down the road toward the village. A few bodies struggled on the bare ground before the temple, and then it was over.

Zhogmi called a cease-fire. There had been no answering shots from the mob, not even a flung stone. It occurred to him that they had charged the temple out of concern for the monks; but in the moment of their assault, he had felt claustrophobic, on the verge of being overwhelmed. Now that feeling passed. The work team was in control.

Jing Meng-Chen stumbled from the interior of the building, holding his hand to a bloody shoulder. "One of your men fired," he reported.

Zhogmi pulled the man's bloodied hand away from his shoulder; the skin was gouged, but the wound looked minor. "How did this happen?"

"A stray bullet — it's nothing."

Gesturing to one gunman to follow, Zhogmi headed toward the central hall. "Are they still resisting?" he asked Jing Meng-Chen.

"Still?"

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Beyond a row of columns, they came into a vast room where the smell and smoke of incense were inseparable from those of gunpowder. Several dozen monks lay prostrate, bald heads covered with their hands, trembling and whimpering. Zhogmi's men stood over them.

"Good," Zhogmi told them. "Did any run off?"

"One tried." A lone monk sprawled in a corner; it was hard to tell where his maroon robes ended and the blood began. Zhogmi crossed the room to a hallway beyond it. There were small, dark alcoves here, plenty of hiding places. He indicated that his gunman should follow the corridor to the right; he went to the left with Jing Meng-Chen.

"Jowo Tenzin ran this way when the shooting started," he said quietly. "I'm not sure I trust him."

"He is not to be feared," said Jing Meng-Chen. "At worst a coward."

"A coward in his position can do much harm."

Someone stepped into the corridor ahead of them — a man too wiry and small to be Jowo Tenzin. He carried a long dagger cocked in one hand, red wetness gleaming at the tip.

Zhogmi ducked sideways and fired a single shot. The figure slumped back through a doorway, letting out a wheezing cry. Jing Meng-Chen shouted and ran past Zhogmi, through the door.

"Careful!" Zhogmi cautioned, fearing that he had only wounded the assassin. He crept to the threshold and saw on the floor, by the light of a weak electric lamp, the object he'd mistaken for a dagger.

It was a paintbrush.

Inside the chamber, Jing Meng-Chen knelt beside the wounded man. The wall behind him was streaked with red — some of it carefully applied in the outline of a large figure, but the rest sloppily dashed and smeared and dripping. A red streak showed where the man had slid against the wall as he died. He was small and slender, with gray hair and delicate hands that had just stopped trembling.

Jing Meng-Chen turned toward Zhogmi Chhodak, his face unreadable. Zhogmi did not know what to say; but he need not explain himself. Any accident in these circumstances was excusable.

At that moment, Jowo Tenzin pressed into the chamber. "What happened here? What — oh my! Oh no!"

Tenzin rushed to the frail old man, cradling him in his arms. Jing Meng-Chen backed away and bowed slightly to Zhogmi before announcing

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in a neutral tone, "He's dead."

Tenzin cried, "Why Gyatso Samphel? What did he do?"

"He attacked Zhogmi Chhodak," Jing Meng-Chen said sharply. Zhogmi shifted uncomfortably, despite being grateful for the support.

"Attacked? I—I don't believe it. He never would have hurt a soul."

"Perhaps we came too near his precious mural. You knew Gyatso Samphel. If he thought his maiden goddess was in danger, nothing would stop him from protecting her."

Zhogmi looked at the wall with new interest. It was ancient stone, part of the original temple, the surface chipped and shattered. Traces of faded tints lingered among dabs of bright new color — mostly red — that had been so recently applied. The form of a maiden might have been taking shape there, but the lines were so vague and incomplete that he could hardly imagine her.

Tenzin went back to ministering hopelessly over the corpse. "This is terrible," he kept saying. "Terrible."

"We should get the bodies out of the temple," said Jing Meng-Chen. "It will be best to dispose of them somewhere away from the village." Zhogmi was glad for the young man's efficiency. He felt that he could safely surrender this task to him.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I am unfamiliar with the area. . . ."

"Leave it to me, sir. I would be pleased to see this through."

Tenzin gave his DMC associate a look of utter horror. It was enough to convince Zhogmi that he had found himself a trustworthy aide.

Zhogmi went back to the central hall, where the monks still lay in abject surrender on the stone flags.

"The Shining Hill monastery is clearly the proper focus for our investigations," he announced to them and to his men. "We will relocate from the village this afternoon and make our base here. All restoration work is hereby suspended until a full investigation has been concluded and approved by the United Front Work Department. I notice that Shining Hill is particularly rocky; once broken down to the proper size, the stones should make excellent material for roadbeds. I will distribute work orders for all monks, provided they can prove that they did not participate in this act of counterrevolution."

There was no response, but he did not expect one. His men went to work with their usual efficiency, rounding up the monks. They ordinarily

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lived in cramped dormitories and shabby little outbuildings clustered on the hillside behind the temple; but until a system for monitoring them could be established, he ordered they be kept in the central hall for easy observation. Many of the TAR's major monasteries were overseen by two or more army contingents. On a tour he'd taken of the Ganden monastery near Lhasa, he had passed through three checkpoints where pilgrims were identified and searched while approaching the monastery; the monks themselves required passes from the DMC in order to leave the grounds, and were always thoroughly searched before reentering. Given the primitive local conditions and the size of his force, Zhogmi could only dream of establishing such order — but it was something to aim for.

It felt good to cut through the administrative nonsense and take direct action. He was finally making his presence felt. Last night, wading through paperwork — confused ledgers and bank statements — he had nearly despaired of achieving anything here. But now it looked as if this would not be a wasted assignment after all.

Only one thing still troubled him: the memory of a small man darting out with a blade that had magically transformed into a paintbrush.

If he kept his mind clean and clear, his principles firmly in sight, then he need feel no pangs of conscience. What good was the old man's mural, after all? It had no value, no purpose except to reinforce religious thinking. An aura of superstition clung to this place, like the soot of incense that smudged the temple's walls. He must not let it cloud his thoughts.

Zhogmi strode down the steps of the temple, keeping his eyes away from the speckled trails in the dust where things recently had been dragged out of sight. He looked out over the quiet valley and took a deep breath. There was never enough air at this altitude to fill his lungs. At least his sharp headaches had ceased to come so frequently; he supposed he was finally acclimating, though he didn't like the reminder that his ancestors had dwelt on this high plain, their blood adapted to absorb greater concentrations of oxygen than those of sea-level inhabitants. Biologically, he supposed he should have felt at home in Tibet. If he did well in his post — as he intended — the Religious Affairs Bureau would station him here indefinitely. He hated that thought, but hated even more the idea of being in conflict with his duty. He must strive to be at peace with himself. With sufficient promotion, he might one day return to a centralized post, a position of power in Beijing.

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He walked around the side of the temple, looking up toward Shining Hill. As the day warmed toward noon, it looked like simply another bare Tibetan slope, a treeless mound, and the monastery merely a heap of ugly slabs and broken rock with tattered prayer flags flying.

Something else was flying, he noticed. Dark specks circled near the peak of Shining Hill.

Vultures.

II

ON THE far side of Shining Hill, just below the crest, lay a broad slab of brown-stained granite where Jing Meng-Chen worked quietly and quickly with a sharp curved knife, cutting deftly through tendon and muscle, ripping cords of sinew, twisting bone from meat. A woman's thin brown arm came loose from her shoulder; he laid it on the rock beside its twin, then started in on the legs. While he worked, he whispered the few words of the *Bardo Thodol — The Book of the Dead* — that he remembered, wondering if the woman's spirit could hear him, wondering if she saw the vultures that circled overhead and waited just out of reach on the flat rock that formed their table. Toward the edges of the rock, some were already feeding. Broad-winged shadows crossed over him again and again as he worked, stitching patterns on the stone that were, in their own dark way, reassuring. Some things, at least, had not changed; some traditions, when disguised as necessary surreptition, could still be carried out. The elaborate rites of the *Bardo Thodol* were well on their way to being forgotten, but the vultures would never lapse in the duty nature had given them.

Five more bodies lay in a row on the rock behind him. He had sent away Zhogmi Chhodak's men when they'd finished carrying the bodies up to the rock, and they had been eager to leave when they saw what he intended. And Jing was grateful to be alone, to mourn in his own fashion, as he cleanly cut the lines that had attached him to these lives.

As he worked, he gathered small identifying articles from each victim — a turquoise ring, a string of *mani* beads — which he would give to their families later. Only Gyatso Samphel, whose body was the last in line, had no living relative. Jing Meng-Chen had been closest of any to the old artist.

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Jing Meng-Chen was not Chinese; his Tibetan name — the name his parents had given him — was Dorje Wangdu. His family had lived near Shining Hill for generations, following old ways of life, with some of their sons joining the monastery, some daughters going to the nunnery, which survived only as a bomb-blasted heap down in a cleft of the hill below the table rock. Most of his ancestors had been trained in the necessary rites of sky burial. It was the rock of the Vulture Maiden.

Shining Hill had for ages been known as the "Shining Hill of the Vulture Maiden," but that name had been considered too unsavory by communist officials when they came through with their maps seeking likely tourist sites, applying new Chinese names to places that already had ancient Tibetan ones. The Vulture Maiden was a revered local deity, an ancient goddess traditionally associated with this peak, this specific rock. The early *Bön-po* sorcerers had appeased her with magic and traded offerings for her favors. The great Indian saint Padmasambhava had challenged her to a magical battle on the condition that if he defeated her, then she must become a defender of Buddhism. The Vulture Maiden, failing to injure him, had become a ferocious protector of the faith. Today her powers were more spiritual than temporal, but it had not always been so, according to the stories old Gyatso Samphel had told Jing Meng-Chen when he was a boy:

"Many hundreds of years ago, a band of Mongol brigands attacked our village," the old artist had once told him. "They plundered the stores, then assaulted the nunnery on Shining Hill. There was no monastery in those days. The Vulture Maiden was worshiped there by twelve nuns. In fact, her incarnation dwelt among them as a beautiful girl. It was she who met the marauders as they rode over Shining Hill. The chief robber was stunned at the sight of her, not knowing that she was a goddess, thinking her nothing but a lovely maiden. He vowed that if she willingly surrendered herself and became his bride, he would spare the other nuns. She agreed in order to spare her sisters suffering, but of course he was lying. No sooner had he put her on his horse than the chief robber ordered his men to take the nunnery. The Vulture Maiden rose straight up in the air, huge wings appearing from her shoulders, and into the nunnery she flew, locking the gate behind her. The furious robbers set fire to the building —which in those days was made of wood. As the smoke and flames began to rise, cries came from inside the nunnery, but gradually these cries

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became hoarse and strange, until finally the roof collapsed in an explosion of sparks and clouds of smoke. At that moment the brigands saw thirteen huge vultures rising from the pyre, circling into the sky. The Vulture Maiden, you see, had reverted to her proper form, and taken her devotees with her. And since that day, the vultures have watched over Shining Hill."

"What of the robbers?" Jing Meng-Chen had asked.

"Ah, they fled the wrath of the Vulture Maiden, but they couldn't run fast or far enough. Eventually, unable to eat or sleep for fright, they toppled from their horses and died where they fell. And then . . . *they were eaten by the nuns!*"

Today, as Jing Meng-Chen worked, there were substantially more than thirteen vultures in view; it was as if they had come from all over the mountains to this offering. They were all shaggy, weather-beaten birds; any one of them looked ancient enough to be one of the original thirteen. But which, he wondered, was the Vulture Maiden? Gyatso Samphel had said she could take any form — that, in fact, the beautiful maiden and the hideous bird were really the same thing . . . for the dead, when offered up in a sky burial, perceived the vultures as beautiful women coming to carry them to heaven.

Jing Meng-Chen hoped that these innocent dead, villagers and monks, might find some beauty in their last sight of earth. They had seen such ugliness in recent decades. If only the Vulture Maiden had turned them all into vultures when the occupying armies flooded into Tibet; when, instead of one nunnery, thousands were destroyed. As vultures, they could have circled above their land, screeching out the vanity of conquest, reminding the Chinese that one day they would stagger and fall, and the waiting birds descend.

But no miracles had aided Tibet in recent years. The Vulture Maiden and the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, the *dakinis* and spirits of water and rock and sky, all had stood helpless before the weapons and overpowering numbers of the Red Chinese army. In the late 1950s and into the early '60s, the crushing might of the mainland had been brought to bear on the peaceful, unprotected people of Tibet. Their ragtag army, equipped with ancient muskets and rifles that they were scarcely trained to use, fell quickly. The physical devastation of war and occupation was horrible, but even worse was the constant psychic torture.

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Shining Hill was far removed from the centers of fighting. Dorje had been a toddler when the troubles first reached his village, though there had been a Chinese prefect in the region for several years, his authority nominal and his attempts at enforcement halfhearted. Then one day a cadre of enthusiastic young Communists had arrived to commence the village's reeducation. For a time the populace had grudgingly conceded to the demands of the cadre and learned to spout socialist maxims; but they soon grew to hate and resist the fanatical lessons, which were full of attacks on their beliefs and traditions, undermining their cultural identity. The core of this resistance came to be located in Shining Hill monastery, a huge and sprawling brother to the smaller but thriving nunnery on the far side of the hill. The monastery was a village in itself, patrolled by gangs of vigilant *dob-dob*, or fighting monks, who for years, though studying side by side, had fought for narrow margins of advantage within the monastery. With the arrival of the Chinese, the gangs had joined as allies. It was they who launched the first and last open demonstration against Chinese rule . . .

Little Dorje Wangdu had heard the thunder from Shining Hill and seen the plumes of smoke and dust. He joined his family in running to witness the battle. The monks had slings and stones and a few old rifles, but raking machine-gun fire kept them from the ramparts of their best-defended buildings, and cannon soon blasted even the thickest walls into rubble. The weapons of the army formed an impenetrable wall below the monastery, keeping back the villagers; no one could have ventured into that field without being crushed. The people watched in helpless horror. Occasionally, chips of shattered stone, flung by the fury of an explosion, stung their faces. For Dorje Wangdu, the sight itself was a cruel shard that buried itself in his brain, never to be dislodged.

Nor were the months that followed any easier to forget. The vultures stayed thick as snow clouds over Shining Hill. His father and older brother spent days dragging bodies from the ruined monastery and nunnery, taking them to the rock table, doing their accustomed work. They came home in shock, their faces stretched taut by a grief they dared not show before the soldiers for fear of being punished as sympathizers. For the eyes of authority, they wore masks of stone — visages hewn from the bedrock of their rage and sorrow. They managed to look neutral, even obedient. Jing Meng-Chen had molded his own features in their likeness, and the imitation of obedience had served him well ever since.

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His soul stepped away from his body and watched his father fall.

One terrible night, leaders of the cadre had come to rouse Dorje's family for an emergency *thamzing*, or struggle session. These were regular features of village life under the cadre, but never had Dorje's family been the target of the session — and never had the child himself been forced along. He was scarcely old enough to understand when his parents were accused of conspiring with monks and nuns to read from the forbidden *Bardo Thodol* while performing sky burials; there were other charges he did not understand. Some accusations, his parents and brother denied; others, they silently accepted. The villagers were forced to join in the accusations, to criticize the family's betrayal of socialist principles. Many were in tears as they stammered out condemnations at the cadre leader's prompting. Finally Dorje's father flew into a rage, screaming at his old friends and companions, demanding they stand up to the Chinese and fight as the monks had done.

The meeting hall grew quiet. Jing Meng-Chen still remembered the fear Dorje Wangdu had felt in that silence, and the way the cadre leader had smiled very patiently, as if he understood everything; he still remembered how the cadre leader had taken out his gun and knelt beside him, whispering very soothingly to Dorje Wangdu as he fit the shiny gun into the little boy's fingers.

At first, Dorje Wangdu did not understand how or why he had come to be the center of attention. The gun glittered very prettily, and it felt cold and heavy in his hand. He had always wanted to hold one, so he did not understand why his parents' faces suddenly filled with dread.

The cadre leader showed him how to aim the gun, directing the boy's arm until it pointed at his father. Dorje Wangdu looked into his father's eyes and saw that they forgave him, but he didn't know why he should be forgiven, or what he was about to do. Then the cadre leader's finger gently pressed the boy's finger, which lay lightly and nervously upon the mysterious trigger. And there was a sound. . . .

A sound. . . .

Dorje Wangdu died in that moment. Died as his father died. His soul stepped away from his body and watched his father fall. The disembodied

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spirit watched the cadre leader instruct the sad, dead little boy to repeat this action twice more, so that his mother fell, and then his brother. And the cadre leader, being very pleased with the boy's uncompromising adherence to principles, thereupon adopted him and gave him a shiny new Chinese name, which was necessary because Dorje Wangdu was dead, and his body needed a new name to suit the lifeless force that inhabited it.

He had dwelt in the village, but apart from it, ever since. The cadre leader had eventually transferred to another village, but was not permitted to bring along a Tibetan child. Jing Meng-Chen remained behind, living on the welfare of the villagers, which was sparing — for though many pitied the orphan, their fear and mistrust were greater. He had lived too long with the Chinese.

Only Gyatso Samphel had reached out to him.

On the table rock, Jing Meng-Chen came at last to Gyatso's body. Soon his work would be done. It was grisly work, yes, but it was honest and necessary, and not nearly as grim as the work he would continue when he had finished here, when he would return to the monastery to do the bidding of Zhogmi Chhodak.

He laid the old man gently on the stone. Dusty black birds flapped around him, impatient for him to finish; they were already busy feeding elsewhere, tearing strings of raw meat, circling up with bloody bones they sometimes dropped when fending off others with snaps of their black beaks. But the vultures were far less fierce and agitated than his thoughts....

Jing feared he had betrayed himself when Zhogmi Chhodak shot Gyatso Samphel. He had been unable, in that moment, to suppress a cry of grief; and afterward he'd had to force himself to wear a mask thrice as emotionless as any he'd ever adopted, in order to dampen Zhogmi's suspicions. Nor had Jowo Tenzin's look of disgust been easy to ignore. Tenzin knew how much Gyatso had done for him. But there was no other way to survive among the Communists; that much Jing knew. One must be even colder, even more extreme than the worst of them, in enforcing regulations; one must pretend to a bottomless servility in following orders; and one must finally feign utter stupidity or else risk being branded an intellectual . . . and thinkers, under this regime, rarely survived. If the villagers and the monks and his fellows on the Democratic Management Committee considered him coldhearted, ruthless, servile, and stupid, all this was to his credit in the eyes of the overlords. And in

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the end, through such deception, he might better serve those who neither loved nor trusted him, but to whose service he had devoted his life: the Tibetans. His people.

So I serve you now, Gyatso Samphel, he thought, as the curved knife sliced through flesh, snagged on sinew, twisted in deep sockets of bone to sever the stubbornest points of attachment. *I free you from the suffering of this earth and offer you up to the Vulture Maiden you loved.*

Gyatso Samphel had spent his youth in the Shining Hill monastery, training as a religious artist, painting murals and *thangkas.* After the destruction of the monastery, he had been the lone survivor with exact knowledge of the Vulture Maiden's iconography. As he told Jing Meng-Chen, each image was precisely and geometrically constructed, her limbs always in certain sacred proportions and configurations, the hues of her skin and feathers always mixed to a precise shade of red. There must be so many jewels precisely arranged in her ornaments, and the sacred weapons and flowers and bells she held in her many hands must be thus and thus without exception, since each possessed a deep significance to those capable of understanding and explaining the illustration. Gyatso Samphel had not studied long enough to learn the *significance* of each ornament, but it was enough that he could reproduce the image exactly. Others might be versed in its analysis, but if none of them had the skill and training to reproduce the Maiden properly, she might still be lost. He had carried her image in his memory and nowhere else for three decades, since the destruction of the temple, when the soldiers had chipped the Vulture Maiden's image from the one wall that had escaped annihilation in the shelling. When permission and funds finally came to restore the temple, money was set aside specifically for Gyatso's restoration of the Vulture Maiden mural. First the temple itself had been rebuilt around that remaining scarred wall. When the outer structure was complete, Gyatso — excited almost beyond his ability to bear — had begun ritually to prepare his paints. Only today, on the auspicious occasion of the first Spring Festival allowed in the prefect in decades, had he begun the actual painting.

A few fine outlines were all he had committed to stone. And now the image of the Vulture Maiden, which Gyatso had preserved for all these years, was lost forever. What remained of her was decaying in the head that Jing Meng-Chen now severed from the frail shoulders, the sunken

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chest. Gyatso had been ill for the past year. Only the dream of completing his Vulture Maiden had kept him alive — but dreams could not stop bullets.

No inner strength could finally keep Jing Meng-Chen from collapsing. He hugged the pathetic head to his chest, pressed his own cheeks to the old man's lifeless ones, weeping helplessly. Hearing a rattle of stones on the hillside behind him, he spun around frantically, fearing discovery.

But it was no one. No one but a great vulture, the largest he had seen today, sitting at the crest of Shining Hill. It raised its wings and rose into the air, screaming hoarsely, blotting out the sun.

Jing Meng-Chen was seized by a sorrow that might have belonged to Dorje Wangdu. Something inside him came loose with a tearing pang, and he offered it up in a kind of sky burial, just as he offered the head of his last and only friend.

The vulture swooped low and snatched the round head from his fingers. He watched the creature rise and rise, spiraling upward until she was a tiny speck vanishing like an ash into the sun's pyre.

III

THE ABBOT Gelek Thargey stammered and lied and contradicted himself throughout the first part of his interview. Judicious use of an electric cattle prod helped strengthen his memory and increase his eagerness for self-criticism, but ultimately Zhogmi had to admit that the abbot knew nothing about the misappropriated funds, and was simply concerned with hiding certain noncelibate activities that might have been frowned upon in feudal Tibet, but that were scarcely his concern — especially since he carried orders for mandatory sterilization of two-thirds of the village women, with the additional proviso that 80 percent of existing pregnancies would be terminated immediately. Thus, the counterrevolution would be cut off at its source, and the Tibetan population reduced to a manageable level. He dismissed the abbot, who needed some help returning to the central hall; his shit-spattered legs could scarcely carry him.

More coherent but equally damning was the testimony of Tomo Rochi, the monastery's *nierba*, or treasurer and storeroom keeper. Having heard his abbot's screams, he threw the monastery's books wide open for

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Zhogmi's perusal. It quickly became obvious that most of the funds allocated for restoration had never reached the monastery. Because the DMC was responsible for disbursing all moneys, he understood that he must turn his real attention to the officers themselves. There was nothing more despicable in his eyes than a corrupt administration. Jowo Tenzin was, of course, his first suspect, but it would not be so simple to subject him to direct questioning. Those who had appointed Tenzin were still in power. Zhogmi dare not accuse him without undeniable evidence.

He instructed his team to continue interviewing the monks, confident that more obvious and easily crushed dissidence would be uncovered among them. Even such small-scale victories boosted morale. By nightfall the work team — except for a small contingent that had remained in the village — was fully situated in various drafty cells of the main temple. The monks were housed in the main dormitory — already prisonlike and easy to patrol; a few others were charged with feeding them. The fractious monk who had incited the Spring Festival uprising, the first one shot, turned out to have been the head cook. Zhogmi would not vouch for the quality of the food the cook's frightened assistants prepared. It was another demonstration of the principle that criminal activity injured mainly the criminals themselves.

Zhogmi took a chamber in the main temple for himself. After preparing a bowl of noodles on a small camp stove, he sat huddled on his cot, wrapped in blankets, trying to keep from freezing. The stone walls and floor sucked all the warmth from the air; his oil-burning heater was useless against the endless chill. The work team's voices and laughter echoed through the building, but scarcely filled it. Still, it was a more reassuring sound than the mournful, morbid chanting of the monks would have been. His mood was black. He kept thinking for no good reason of the old man he had shot, and the paintbrush, and that chipped wall smeared with blood of exactly the hue that had tipped the brush.

After a restless hour, in which sleep began to seem ever less likely, Zhogmi rose — still fully dressed and wrapped in a blanket — and took a lantern into the hall. Night had turned the temple into a cave; he feared a wrong turn might lead him into the bowels of the earth. Then he saw on a threshold the tear-shaped pattern left by a paintbrush, with a few bristles caught in the dried red pigment.

He stepped slowly into the room and played his light over the wall,

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looking for the suggestive outlines he had seen that morning.

The light trembled in his hands.

For a moment he thought it was an illusion, but he held his breath and moved forward to examine the wall. There was no mistaking it. A painter had been at work. In defiance of his orders, the restoration had continued!

What this morning had been a few curved outlines, now formed a solidifying shape. The figure looked almost feminine, but there was something grotesque about the shape of the head. He knew it was not unusual for these barbaric figures to possess a multitude of arms, but here the shoulders and limbs were blurred — probably through the artist's haste — and poised in a position that made little sense in terms of human anatomy. Where before, the figure had been hollow, with no inner color other than that of the wall, now it was a deep, rich red, as if the old man's blood had soaked into the stone and spread to neatly fill the contours.

None of these details surprised him nearly as much as the sheer fact that it had been painted at all. Who would have dared? And how could they have managed it, with the temple occupied all day by the work team?

Some rogue monk must be hiding in the temple, or coming and going by an unknown entrance. He backed out of the room and began calling for his men. No one would sleep until they found their culprit. This suited Zhogmi, as he knew he would find sleep impossible in any case.

The members of the DMC dwelt at the edge of the monastery grounds, in a row of small prefabricated houses. At first, Zhogmi intended to rouse them all, but he decided to strengthen his relationship with Jing Meng-Chen alone for now.

Jing Meng-Chen came out uncomplainingly, instantly cooperative, though he looked puzzled when Zhogmi explained the reason for the search.

"I don't see how that could be. Painted, you say?"

"Clearly by one of the monks, and not one we had in our custody."

"All the monks have been accounted for. They are all in your charge."

"Then some other artist — a layman working with them."

"Not to contradict you, but —"

"Speak your mind. I'm sure your thoughts run close to the truth."

"There's no one qualified to continue that work. We requested other artists from some of the larger monasteries to help with the painting, but never received permission. Gyatso Samphel was to do all the major work

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himself. Few in this area are sufficiently trained even to follow his instructions."

"Some clever rascal must have managed to hide his skill from even you."

"Can I see this restoration?"

"If you think it will give you some idea of its author, yes."

As they hurried across the compound, shouts from the dormitories told them that the monks were being roused for questioning. Zhogmi asked Jing Meng-Chen whether there might be any overlooked entrances to the temple, and he admitted that there were a few small apertures through which even a child would have trouble squeezing. Then they reached the mural.

Jing Meng-Chen's surprise was no greater than Zhogmi's. In the brief interval since he'd last seen the wall, the restoration had continued still further!

The red body of the goddess now was dotted with dozens of colored specks, like an array of violet, green, and golden stars just coming into focus in a telescope. And she had eyes now . . . round black eyes gleaming wetly in that troubling, incomplete face. Jing Meng-Chen ran a finger over the wall, looked at it. "Dry," he said.

"Someone's inside the temple!" Zhogmi cried.

Jing Meng-Chen turned toward him with an amazed look. "I'm telling you: no one here could do this."

"What skill does it take to wave a brush?"

"Sir, we weed out potential subversives early on — that means the intelligentsia, anyone with talent. Once, the best Tibetan minds might have studied in the monastic colleges, but today that would be an explosive situation. Talent is discouraged. This is how it must be."

"You're saying that all the monks are morons."

"No, most are simply mediocre because uneducated. We want them that way. Thus, the tourists — if they ever come — will see what appears to be a functioning, vital monastery, and they will contribute generously to its operation; but meanwhile, the words the monks chant are meaningless to them. When the Tibetan tongue finally ceases to be spoken, then the texts will seem even more nonsensical . . . and the religion will naturally die out as planned."

"All this happens slowly, Jing Meng-Chen. Many still remember the old

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ways, and will engage in subversion to restore them."

"But this. . . ." He raised his hands to the wall painting. "This goes far beyond subversion. This is the work of a skilled and knowledgeable artist. I tell you: I know each of the monks here; I know them intimately. None is capable of this. I was raised in that village out there, and there are no artists in it. Gyatso Samphel was the last!"

"Then what are you saying? That this image is painting itself?"

Jing Meng-Chen's face grew pale. "Certainly not!"

Zhogmi regretted that he had even expressed this fanciful impossibility, for it made him appear as superstitious as the locals. He turned away from the wall. "There's a rational explanation. Someone in our midst who comes and goes without attracting attention. Tell me. . . ."

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me about Jowo Tenzin."

Jing Meng-Chen hesitated. "He is a good man, devoted to the Party, determined that the monastery function in accordance with official policy."

"So it would appear. He is full-blooded Tibetan, is he not?"

"Yes."

"And can we be certain where his loyalties lie?"

"I think so. He's not a religious or superstitious man. Nor does he have any artistic skills I am aware of."

"Nevertheless, I am convinced he is practiced at deception. His record books are a tangle of what I believe to be deliberate obscurations, disguised to look like mild incompetence."

"Are you saying he steals from the monastery?"

"Not from the monastery, from the government! The monastery has no money of its own. If I prove this crime against him, it is likely that he will be suspected of others."

Jing Meng-Chen looked pained.

"No one likes to hear such things about his superiors; but I have reason to think Tenzin soon may be leaving his post. Would it please you to lead the DMC yourself?"

"I'll happily serve the Party in whatever office is entrusted to me."

"But you can tell me nothing more of Jowo Tenzin?"

"No. I did not realize the accounts were in such disarray. I am sorry to hear that he is under suspicion."

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"Not only for theft." Zhogmi gestured toward the red figure. "This is also a serious transgression."

A member of Zhogmi's work team appeared in the doorway. "Nothing," he said.

Zhogmi felt an overwhelming futility and exhaustion. Dismissing the man, he turned back to Jing Meng-Chen.

"I'm sorry to have interrupted your rest," he said. "It's obvious we'll learn nothing more tonight. But please . . . no word of my suspicions to Jowo Tenzin."

"Of course not."

Jing Meng-Chen bowed sharply, then hurried from the chamber.

Zhogmi listened to his footsteps receding, then faced the mural and marveled at the audacity of its creator. There was something seductive about the creature it depicted. Her curves were sinuous, openly erotic, as were in a way the eyes. He was well aware that the old gods of Tibet were often portrayed in a manner to arouse the lust of celibate monks — to keep them more firmly bound to their religion by infusing it with sensual snares. And all while they denied the importance of the body. Such hypocrites, these Buddhists!

He moved back to the far wall and sank down, retrieving the blanket he had dropped there earlier, drawing it around him. The red figure seemed to waver as he stared at it, but that was fatigue, making the whole room swim. He would guard the wall himself tonight; no further restoration would be allowed. It seemed strangely important that the renegade artist not be allowed to finish, as if to complete the painting were an act of revolution.

The painted jewels glimmered like actual stones. His eyes watered, but he forced them open. His mind wandered along the lithe lines of the figure, the suggestions of firm, small breasts, a dancer's hips and thighs. If only the face and head were clearer — he could almost imagine a pretty woman's face materializing around those eyes. She seemed to smile in greeting, though her mouth was oddly proportioned — too wide, too stiff. . . . And then he realized why the arms were held so strangely, and why they appeared blurred. They were not arms at all, but wings.

Outside, he heard a stirring of air. He fought to keep his eyes open, to stay on guard. But he felt drugged, betrayed. Ceasing to struggle, he slept.

* * *

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IV

JING MENG-CHEN shivered with fear as he hurried back to his house. *Restoring itself*, Zhogmi Chhodak had blurted. Impossible —but no more so than his other explanations. There simply was no one in the area versed in such painting — and no one who knew the attributes of the Vulture Maiden as thoroughly as Gyatso Samphel.

As he approached his house, he received an additional shock. Someone hurried out of the shadows, seizing him sharply by an elbow and drawing him around the corner. He knew from the man's huffing breath that it was Jowo Tenzin, even before he spoke.

"Jing! Where have you been? What's the commotion?"

"Zhogmi Chhodak believes someone is continuing the restoration work on Gyatso's mural."

"Painting? But that's impossible."

"I told him as much, but still — the work speaks for itself."

"You've seen it?"

"Yes. Skillfully done, and quickly, too. It looks just like Gyatso's work...."

Jowo placed a hand on his shoulder. "I know how close you were to him, Jing. You — you were practically his son."

Jing did not feel comfortable confiding in Jowo Tenzin, especially after Zhogmi's warnings. He merely nodded and said, "I must be alone now." Jowo stood aside, and Jing went on into his tiny home.

He threw himself down in the dark, hoping to escape the mesh of anxious thoughts. Sleep, however, would not come. He kept hearing the morning's gunfire and feeling the bullet graze his shoulder; he remembered the cry of the vultures and the way his knife had parted limbs and ligaments. He could not shake the sight of the Vulture Maiden. She seemed to brighten and solidify on the inside of his eyelids, as if Gyatso Samphel were alive within him, painting her there, imbuing the image with his own lost life.

It was further thoughts of this nature that sent him from his bed and across the monastery, stopping once near the temple entrance to answer the challenge of a work-team guard. He made his way over the gravelly hillside, into the warren of old cells that had once housed monks and supplies. The little structures were all crumbled and open to the

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elements, save for the one that Gyatso Samphel had restored, patching the roof and supplying a door that lay open tonight, creaking in the wind. Inside, he found and lit a candle stub. Gyatso's few belongings were in disorder; no doubt the work team had considered this a likely hiding spot for their supposed rebel artist. Gyatso's brushes and pencils lay on a small shelf, with vials of colored powders and various sorts of paper. Gyatso had collected scraps of all colors and sizes, using them as blank surfaces for sketching. Jing rummaged among them until he found what he sought on the back of a packing slip. His breath lodged in his throat when he smoothed the sheet against the wall.

It was the Vulture Maiden, beyond any doubt. She was lightly and rapidly sketched, but still exquisite, complete with all her ornaments and delicate gestures of arms and wings; her slyly cocked head and gaping, curved beak gave her the look of life. She matched almost exactly the goddess now taking shape on the temple wall. This was one of Gyatso's preliminary sketches, a hasty packing-slip *thangka*.

Jing folded up the paper and slipped it into his jacket. If he got the chance, he would compare it to the mural, and prove to himself that it was precisely the design Gyatso had carried in his head. But more than that, he took it with the thought that it was the most precious thing Gyatso had possessed, and therefore the most meaningful token of his friendship.

Looking around the barren cell, he was overwhelmed by thoughts of all the hours he had spent with Gyatso here and in the village. After the cadre leader abandoned him, Gyatso had taken him in. Young Jing had loved the old man; it was the only emotion he had allowed himself. He gladly would have learned the painter's craft had Gyatso not persuaded him that his own family's trade was a necessary one, and must not be lost. Gyatso had insisted that he keep on in his family's tradition, knowing the boy needed some means of clinging to them. He had arranged for Jing to spend part of each year in a neighboring village, apprenticed to a man who performed the sky burial. The Communists did not officially condone the practice, but they appreciated its utility in disposing of their victims. He learned to recognize the signs of abuse on many of the bodies — places where the flesh had been torn by dogs, or burned, or otherwise tormented; he saw the shattered skulls and crushed ribs and evidence of rape; bullet holes and knife thrusts and marks of strangulation. These encounters in his profession helped him hold an unaffected demeanor in the face of

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other horrors, which quickened his promotion into official positions. He came to be considered a man in whom confidence could be placed.

Gyatso Samphel had been the only one who understood Jing, who knew his troubles and his secrets, and that his aims were not the obvious ones. None of this was ever discussed, but the understanding went beyond words.

And now it was gone. His last connection with any person —severed.

He extinguished the candle stub and hurried out, once more crossing near the temple, once more enduring the questions of a guard who didn't recognize him. This time when he reached his bed, he collapsed and slept until the reflected glare of Shining Hill woke him. There was no *kangling* call this morning. Shouted drill instructions echoed from the dormitory. He could not bear to face the work team, and besides, he had a grim errand to run in the village. He started down the road before the sun had cleared the mountains.

He spent the morning knocking on certain doors, returning the tokens he had collected from the dead. His appearance at any house was an occasion for grief, extinguishing the final, feeble hopes of those whose loved ones had not already returned from the monastery. For once, he felt their grudging respect. They knew he had conducted the sky burial according to tradition, preventing further desecration and dishonor. But this was little consolation to Jing Meng-Chen.

By noon he was on his way back to the monastery, making his way down a narrow street at the edge of the village, when a truck pulled up, and someone shouted for him to stand still. He looked up to see one of the work-team men holding a gun on him.

"Get in," the man said. Another member of the *ledhon rukhag* leaped down and waved him into the covered bed of the truck.

"What's wrong?" Jing said as he crawled up. The man jabbed his calf with the barrel of his gun; Jing gasped and sank down, rubbing the bruised muscle.

"Trying to get out of town?" the man said, grinning at him. "There's no way out for you." The gunman squatted across from him, aiming his gun at Jing's groin, one finger playfully stroking the trigger. Jing doubted the man would harm him, not without express orders — but he didn't know what orders might have been given.

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When they reached the monastery, the truck halted directly in front of his house. The gunman bid him leap down, and Jing was glad to do so — until he saw Zhogmi Chhodak coming out of his house, followed by soldiers. When Jing saw his face, hope deserted him.

"I am very disappointed in you, Jing Meng-Chen."

Jing was afraid to say a word. He knew how innocence, viewed from the proper perspective, could look exactly like guilt. He looked away from Zhogmi's eyes, which offered no mercy in any case, seeking clues to his situation.

Zhogmi motioned for Jing to follow him around the back of the house, where a large rock had been rolled aside to reveal a hole freshly dug in the earth.

"There is no point in evasion," Zhogmi Chhodak said.

"What was in it?" he allowed himself to ask.

The other man's mouth grew sterner. "I had hoped you would cooperate. You'll only make things harder on yourself."

"Please. . . ."

"This morning I removed from beneath that rock a small chest full of gold coins — purchased, no doubt, with temple funds."

Jing said, "And how did you come to be looking under rocks?"

"That is none of your concern. Suffice it to say that there are progressive Tibetans who will undermine all subversive activities, even though they may not oppose you openly."

"I know nothing of gold," Jing said, knowing that it was a pointless admission.

"And I suppose you know nothing of this, either."

Zhogmi reached into his jacket and took out a folded scrap of paper. It was Gyatso's sketch of the Vulture Maiden. He had left it beside his bed.

"That's mine, yes. I took it last night from the old man's cell. I wanted to check it against the mural. Ask your own guards; they saw me."

"You were seen crossing the compound late at night — no doubt using a secret entrance to the temple."

"Why should I do such a thing?"

Zhogmi's face grew dark. "To finish the mural, against my orders!"

Jing suddenly realized that the work-team leader was terrified. He scarcely managed to hide his fear behind a professional rage.

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"It's finished?" Jing whispered.

"You think I did it?"

"You deny it?"

"I was in that room myself," Zhogmi said. "You drugged me, didn't you? Then you must have painted all night — a superhuman effort that will gain you nothing and cost you more than you know."

Jing could think of no response. He was absorbed in thoughts of the Vulture Maiden. He longed to see Gyatso's work completed.

"Come," Zhogmi said. "Before we work out the details of your confession, I have a task for you."

With three soldiers behind, and Zhogmi striding before, Jing was taken to the temple. Shafts of afternoon light scarcely warmed the shadowy stone corridors or the desolate central hall. Jing felt as if the building itself were in mourning, its stillness a lament for absent voices, silenced bells.

Zhogmi thrust Jing Meng-Chen into the chamber of the mural.

Suddenly he understood Zhogmi Chhodak's fear — he felt some of it himself, though his awe and admiration were far stronger.

The Vulture Maiden loomed large on the wall, her bright body red as polished ruby, her eyes like wet onyx, her beak diamond-sharp and poised to snap, her wings so powerful and brilliantly drawn that he could almost hear the air cracking as they cut it. She fulfilled all the promise of Gyatso's sketch, but went far beyond it in execution. In the paper sketch, she hung alone on a blank background. Here she hovered and danced in the air above Shining Hill. The crag was done in what looked like liquid gold, intensifying what meager light was already in the room. The sky was green and blue, and of a translucence that entirely concealed the stone beneath it. Where the Vulture Maiden wore feathers, the wall seemed made of feathers; where she was flesh, the wall looked soft and alive. In the air behind the Maiden were a dozen of her consorts, the vulture nuns, each as lifelike as she, each poised to dive — or perhaps just rising. In their claws, some carried struggling bodies in dark blue and drab greenish brown. The blue was a traditional color symbolizing the ego, but the green reminded him of nothing so much as the soldiers' khaki uniforms. Perhaps it bore a political message, after all — though the artistry was transcendent. On the crest of Shining Hill stood a lone human figure holding in one hand a knife curved like the new moon, and in the other a severed head. The figure

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was small, but, like all features of the painting, intricately detailed. Jing leaned forward to see its face, but Zhogmi roughly pulled him back.

"What you created with a brush, you shall destroy with a hammer," he said. There was a pile of tools on the floor — hammers, picks, chisels. Zhogmi picked up a heavy sledgehammer and thrust it at him; Jing could only stare at it.

"But why?" he murmured.

"It's intolerable! Your old friend the painter was poisoned with primitive beliefs. He worshiped vultures — birds of death! Such superstitions will destroy you!"

"The vultures eat only what is already dead," Jing found himself saying. "We are the ones who kill."

Zhogmi must have seen the hate unveiled at last in Jing Meng-Chen's eyes. After so many years of hiding his emotions, keeping his thoughts always in reserve, he knew that this tactic had outlasted its purpose. Further concealment would gain him nothing now that he was suspect. *Your old friend the painter*, Zhogmi Chhodak had said. Which meant that someone had betrayed him to Zhogmi; the same person who had planted the gold behind his house, and convinced the work-team leader that Gyatso Samphel had taught Jing how to paint: Jowo Tenzin. Jowo had taken desperate steps to remove suspicion from himself. But Jing could not really blame him. To Jowo, he must have seemed a terrible traitor — to his people, his parents, to all Tibet. Who better to sacrifice than the collaborator? The resemblance to justice was almost irresistible.

"You can't make me do it," he said.

Zhogmi's eyes poured scorn on him. "You're a disgrace to the Republic! A traitor to your race!"

"Yes," Jing admitted, "I have disgraced my people — but only by pretending for so long to be one of you. I am Tibetan, Zhogmi Chhodak. Tibetan!"

Zhogmi looked dismayed. "But —"

"What confused you? My name? I'm surprised you haven't Sinocized your own by now. Wouldn't your superiors permit it?"

Zhogmi shifted his grip on the hammer.

"If you won't destroy the wall, then I'll destroy you."

"You'll do that anyway."

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Zhogmi's lips curled in a snarl. He thrust Jing into the hands of his aides and advanced on the mural with the hammer raised. "Weep for your precious wall, then. Superstitious fools — how easily you cry over stones." He swung the hammer in a wide arc, bringing its weight crashing full on the crown of Shining Hill.

The whole earth shook beneath the hammer's blow.

Zhogmi dropped the tool and staggered backward. It was as if a gong had been struck deep in the hillside and continued to vibrate. The walls and floor rippled like silk flags in a thick wind. The work team stumbled into the hallway, dropping their guns. A rain of dust hid them from sight. Throughout the temple, Jing could hear explosions of glass, the crash of falling masonry. He crouched in the doorway, which seemed a point of calm in the chaos. Zhogmi knelt in the center of the room, staring up at the Vulture Maiden.

The wall was shattering. Cracks spread from the peak of the painted hill, reaching through the glowing sky, quickening around the forms of the Vulture Maiden and her nuns, loosening them from the wall like separate pieces of a puzzle. As the wall crumbled, daylight came pouring into the chamber — but a richer, more golden and liquid light than Jing had ever seen. Its eerie intensity seemed to purify everything it touched. Shining Hill burned with the brightness of a thousand Tibetan dawns. The sky looked unreal, like the sky in a *thangka*. In that boundless heaven, thirteen fragments of the wall still floated.

The vultures of paint and stone hovered on a high, cold wind whose agonized keening embodied the suffering of Tibet. The twelve consort birds tipped their wings and began to descend, skating rapidly down the sky while the Maiden waited.

Figures in uniform fled across the hillside, running from the shaking buildings, seeking shelter. Rocks tumbled down the slopes, but the men ran heedless of earthly danger. Stretching shadows reached for them. Some turned and squinted at the sky, raising guns to fire — but the guns made no sound, and the vultures did not falter. They snatched up the men in golden talons, and Jing could hear no cries.

As the earth began finally to settle, Zhogmi Chhodak regained his feet, leaning on the hammer like a crutch. He raised it to aim another blow at the sky, as if he believed this entire scene were an image painted on stone; as if they had fallen into the wall and somehow, by brute force,

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he could smash free of it. Seeing such fanatical determination, Jing doubted his own vision of reality. He feared that his mind had shattered at the hammer's first blow — that Zhogmi alone had pierced the illusion and broken through to the truth.

He couldn't bear to see Zhogmi proven right and himself proven mad. A hammer might destroy the Vulture Maiden, but a bullet would certainly stop Zhogmi Chhodak. He could preserve this vision — at least for himself. If it were a dream, then it was one he could live with forever — it didn't matter that no one else saw it. This was *his* truth.

The Vulture Maiden's huge pinions flapped once, gently, as she began her spiraling descent. The monastery was in ruins; the room lay open to the sky, tumbled stones blocking every avenue. Zhogmi held the hammer poised for a killing blow. Jing reached for one of the fallen guns.

Down she swooped, passing through the ranks of her rising consorts as they pushed up toward the heights. Down she came, screaming —

Jing paused, remembering the last time he had fired a gun. This time

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he would kill an enemy. Would the death of a foe cancel out those of his family?

Then the Maiden cried again. She swooped over Jing Meng-Chen, opened her claws, and dropped something. Jing let go of the gun, threw up his hands — and caught it.

It was Gyatso Samphel's living head.

As the Vulture Maiden soared up again, Jing stared in amazement at his old friend's face. The eyes were bright, the mouth smiling.

"Dorje Wangdu," said Gyatso, calling him by his true name, "this is not our fight alone. The gods are threatened, the faith, the land itself. Don't despair — our defenders are beside us. Today the Maiden comes for Zhogmi Chhodak. You see? You need not kill him. His soul is already dead."

Jing looked over at Zhogmi Chhodak, standing staunchly with the hammer cocked, waiting for the Maiden to descend. There was animation in his body, but no life. Jing felt as if he were seeing himself as a child — but far gone. It was death that held the hammer. Death held Zhogmi rigid, a robotic semblance of a man, soulless and obedient. Jing could smell the stench of a rotting soul. He felt a moment's pity, and then only a professional calm.

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The Vulture Maiden swooped again, avoiding Zhogmi Chhodak, and dropped a final gift to Dorje Wangdu.

It fit his hand like another finger. He felt the air humming around the curved blade as if the metal surface were one with his flesh.

The Vulture Maiden waited.

Dorje Wangdu walked up behind Zhogmi and placed a hand on his shoulder. At first, Zhogmi Chhodak didn't move — his full attention was fixed on the Vulture Maiden. Then his shoulders slumped, all the sickness flooding out of him, deserting his body. When it departed, there was nothing left to animate the flesh. He surrendered at last to his culture.

The Vulture Maiden came only when invited, but she did not have long to wait. Dorje worked quickly. And when she was done, the sky swallowed her up as if she had never been.

Dorie Wangdu knelt on the hillside in the ruins of the monastery as the glow went out of Shining Hill, and the sky lost some ineffable part of its luster. Gyatso Samphel's head had vanished, as had the sacred knife. Nor was there any evidence of Zhogmi Chhodak to incriminate him in all the long investigations that would surely follow.

After a time he heard voices calling, and a familiar head appeared over a mound of broken masonry. It was Gelek Thargey, the abbot. He let out a cry on finding someone alive in the rubble.

"The *ledhon rukhag* fled," he gasped, helping Dorje climb up. "They left us alone in the dormitory. By a miracle, none of us was harmed —many of the soldiers have been crushed! But you survived."

"Yes." He came out unsteadily. Monks were combing the wreckage of the temple. He saw no uniforms.

"We will have to rebuild again," Gelek Thargey said in a resigned tone of voice, limping along beside him. "At least it was a natural disaster — and not man-made. Do you think we'll be able to find the money, Jing Meng-Chen?"

He put a hand on Gelek Thargey's shoulder.

"I think the DMC will help you, yes. But you must call me by my true name. Dorje Wangdu."

The abbot regarded him intently, searching his eyes; then he began cautiously to smile. "Sometimes the whole world must move to shake an evil loose," he said.

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There was a cry of dismay nearby, as another body was discovered in the rubble. Dorje felt an ambivalent pang when he recognized Jowo Tenzin. He sank down beside him, closed the staring eyes, hoping the Vulture Maiden had come in a sweet form — but fearing that with Jowo's guilty conscience, it might have been otherwise.

"Do you still know the rites of the *Bardo Thodol*?" he asked Gelek Thargey.

"I keep them up here." The abbot tapped his brow, then leaned over the corpse and began softly to chant.

Dorje Wangdu closed his own eyes and let the words wash over him — a river of sound, deep with meaning he scarcely fathomed. He let it take him, hardly sensing the shadows of birds that passed over his face.

For at the peak of Shining Hill, thirteen vultures circled in anticipation of more burials. Finally, as if weary of waiting, the flock dropped down on the ancient, eroded walls of the nunnery below their rock table. There they cawed and beat their wings and clattered their beaks merrily, like a group of old women telling tales of the distant days, marking time while they waited for the feast being laid out in their honor.

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Coming Attractions

AWARD-WINNING artist Bob Eggleton provides our cover for the September issue — a wonderful sf piece depicting a Martian cave, two astronauts and something rather mysterious. The inspiration for the cover comes from Andrew Weiner's novella "Seeing." "Seeing" is set a few years from now, when we're a bit more pessimistic about the future of the world itself, when the United States has actually planned a manned Mars mission, and when music once again becomes a way to unite a generation. The media called singer Martha Nova "Queen of the eco-protest," but she was more. To her listeners, she was a seer, a visionary, one who actually could predict the future. Then, when she had become the most successful musician of all time, she quit.

The story begins after that, when Robert Duke, another famous musican whose star faded, meets Martha again. They get together just as astronauts land on Mars for the first time, and Martha's strange young son predicts someone is going to die. All the elements weave together into a satisfying tale about vision, visionaries, and — well — seeing.

Also in September, novelist Steve Perry returns after too long an absence with a fantasy about a boy whose father takes him to a monastery for education in the mystical path of life. "The Master of Chan Gen" combines Perry's martial arts knowledge with a strong sense of the unknown.

Jane Yolen adds a bit of levity to the issue with an offbeat parody of not one but two famous stories. "The Gift of the Magicians" takes on O'Henry and a classic fairy tale.

The F&SF competition, squeezed out of this issue, will also be in its usual spot in September.

Future issues will bring some strong science fiction by Robert Reed, Jerry Oltion, Kevin J. Anderson, and Terry Bisson. Mainstream writer Jack Cady, who won a National Endowment for the Arts grant on the strength of his story "The Night We Buried Road Dog" will share that lovely novella with us, and Nancy Springer returns with two stories, a dark novella and a wonderful short fantasy piece. The anniversary issue will include Algis Budrys' long-awaited new novel, and fiction by Jack Williamson, among others. So pass along a copy of the magazine to your friends, and let them know what's coming up. The next few issues promise to be innovating and exciting.

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Continued from page 8

FAREWELL — FAREWELL —

To all my Gentle Readers who have treated me with love for over thirty years, I must say farewell.

I have written three hundred ninety-nine essays for *Fantasy & Science Fiction*. The essays were written with enormous pleasure, for I have always been allowed to say what I wanted to say. It was with horror that I discovered I could not manage a four hundredth essay.

It has always been my ambition to die in harness with my head face down on a keyboard and my nose caught between two of the keys, but that's not the way it worked out.

Fortunately, I believe neither in heaven nor hell, so death holds no terrors for me. It does, however, hold serious terrors for my wife Janet, my daughter Robyn, editors such as Jennifer Brehl, Sheila Williams, and Ed Ferman — all of whom will be unhappy if anything happens to me.

I have talked to each one of them separately, urging them to accept my death, when it comes, with a minimum of fuss. I have had a long and happy life and I have no complaints about the ending thereof, and so farewell my dear wife Janet, my lovely daughter Robyn, and all the editors and publishers who have treated me far better than I deserve.

And farewell also to the Gentle Readers who have been so uniformly kind to me. They have kept me alive to the wonders of science and made it possible for me to write my essays.

So farewell — farewell —

— Isaac Asimov

Isaac Asimov, about 1958

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The hardcover fantasy bestseller–now in paperback!

High magic had been lost to Valdemar centuries ago when the last Herald-Mage gave his life to save the kingdom from destruction by dark sorceries. Yet now the realm is at risk again. And Elspeth, Herald and heir to the throne, must take up the challenge, abandoning her home to find a mentor who can awaken her untrained mage abilities. But as sorcerous evil creeps forth from the Uncleansed Lands, others, too, may be forced to call upon powers they'd sworn never to use again....

MERCEDES LACKEY

WINDS OF FATE

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